

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 458 164

SO 033 058

AUTHOR Stark, Rosalind G.
TITLE Media Ethics: Where Do You Draw the Line? A Case Study Approach to Understanding News Coverage and Journalistic Decision-Making. For Students and Teachers in High School and College.
INSTITUTION Freedom Forum, Arlington, VA.
PUB DATE 1999-00-00
NOTE 129p.; Includes the report, "Jonesboro: Were the Media Fair?"
AVAILABLE FROM NEWSEUM, Attn: Giftshop, 1101 Wilson Boulevard, Arlington, VA 22209 (\$24.95). Tel: 888-639-7386 (Toll Free); Tel: 703-284-3762; Fax: 703-522-4831; e-mail: newseumstore@freedomforum.org; Web site: <http://www.newseum.org/>.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom - Learner (051) -- Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052) -- Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC06 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Ethics; High Schools; Higher Education; Journalism History; Journalism Research; *Mass Media; Mass Media Role; *News Media; *News Reporting; Social Studies

ABSTRACT

This teaching package, for teachers and students in high school and college, has been developed to give students an in-depth look at the media in the United States, with an emphasis on the values, standards, and practices of good journalism. The material will have particular use in journalism courses and in social studies (history, government, political science, world geography) courses. Students who work on school publications or with electronic media will find the material relevant. This curriculum guide contains: a teacher's guide; transparencies of cases from the Newseum's Ethics Center; and "Jonesboro: Were the Media Fair?"--a report published by The Freedom Forum. The teacher's guide is divided into six parts: (1) "About 'Media Ethics: Where Do You Draw the Line?'"; (2) "Background for Teachers"; (3) "Transparencies"; (4) "Case Studies"; (5) "When Tragedy Hits--A True Story"; and (6) "Some Final Words." Transparencies include: "The Story of Ruth Snyder"; "Terror in Oklahoma City"; "Watergate's 'Deep Throat'"; and "'Dateline NBC' Crosses a Line." Case study topics include: (1) "Did the Story Go Too Far?"; (2) "Will Fair but Sensitive Stories Be Allowed to Air on Student TV?"; (3) "Should You Publish this Photo?"; (4) "Detachment or Involvement?"; (5) "Making an Editorial Decision"; (6) "Is This Game Fair?"; (7) "Rush to Judgment"; (8) "Locker Room Luck"; (9) "Up Close and Personal"; (10) "If It Bleeds, It Leads"; (11) "Should an Editor Protect Young Readers?"; and (12) "To What Lengths Should You Go To Get a Story?" (BB)

ED 458 164

MEDIA ETHICS:

Where do you
draw the line?

A CASE STUDY APPROACH TO
UNDERSTANDING NEWS COVERAGE
AND JOURNALISTIC DECISION-MAKING

SO 033 058



PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND
DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS
BEEN GRANTED BY

Stephanie Goff

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

For students and teachers in high school and college

BY ROSALIND G. STARK

NEWSEUM

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

2

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

- ☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- ☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

How to Visit the Newseum with Your Class

You will need reservations to visit the Newseum with your school group. Please call, fax or go on-line for the Group Reservations Department to set up your visit: 703/284-3753; 703/284-3770 (fax); www.newseum.org. It will take about an hour and a half to two hours to see the Newseum with your class. If possible, preview the Newseum before you arrive so you can pinpoint areas of particular interest. After you have made arrangements for the visit, you will receive specific information and instructions to help plan your day.

For a more in-depth look at a topic of interest to your students, you also may want to schedule special class time in the Newseum's Education Center. For Education Center sessions, contact the Education Department: 703/284-3545.

ABOUT THE NEWSEUM

Newseum
The Freedom Forum World Center
1101 Wilson Blvd.
Arlington, VA 22209

Tel: Toll-free 888/NEWSEUM or 703/284-3544
Education Department: 703/284-3545
FAX: 703/522-4831
Web site: www.newseum.org

Metro: Rosslyn (Orange and Blue lines)

Open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday. Admission is free.

MEDIA ETHICS: WHERE DO YOU DRAW THE LINE?

WHAT'S IN THIS PACKAGE:

©Curriculum guide

©Transparencies

©"Jonesboro: Were the Media Fair?"

A report published by The Freedom Forum

THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

MEDIA ETHICS:

Where do you
draw the line?

**A CASE STUDY APPROACH TO
UNDERSTANDING NEWS COVERAGE
AND JOURNALISTIC DECISION-MAKING**

BY ROSALIND G. STARK

Acknowledgments

"Media Ethics: Where Do You Draw the Line?" was created for the Newseum's Education Department: Judith D. Hines, director
Leonard A. Hall, education programs manager
Beth Schlenoff, graphic design.

The impetus for this project comes from the Newseum and its comprehensive look at the past, present and future of news. In particular, the Newseum's Ethics Center provided the basis for the approach used with the case studies in this package. The Ethics Center's scenarios, many of which are reproduced here, were produced by Amy Maddox and Joe Cortina and written and edited by Patti Herman and Eric Newton. Karen Wyatt, Yvonne Egertson and Nancy Stewart developed the graphics for the Newseum's Ethics Center.

For their support of this project from its inception, the creators of "Media Ethics: Where Do You Draw the Line?" owe special thanks to Newseum President Peter Prichard and Executive Director Joe Urschel. Thanks, as well, to Managing Editor Eric Newton for his insightful editorial guidance, and to Patty Casey, Maurice Fliess, Emi Matsumoto, Meredith Peck, Don Ross and Karen Wyatt for their help with final touches.

A committee of Newseum volunteers provided ongoing advice and consultation as this curriculum package was being developed: Mary Arnold-Hemlinger, Lainge Bailey, Sumanto Banerji, Lily Liu, Cesar Soriano, Emily Kohn, Zygmunt Nagorski and Kathryn Ann Shenkle. Special thanks to them all and to the Newseum's Jackie Grant for coordinating the volunteers' efforts. And to Lainge Bailey, Lily Liu, Cesar Soriano and Emily Kohn, who also served as writers, editors and contributors, we express our deep appreciation.

Naomi Dixon, Wendy Eagan, Suzin Glickman, Pat Kuehnle, Rebecca Sipos and other members of the Newseum's Teacher Advisory Team gave invaluable advice. Pat Kuehnle's students at Seneca Ridge Middle School in Loudoun County, Va., tested the Jonesboro case study; their enthusiasm and dedication were inspiring. Thanks also to Donna Wine, J.R. Tucker High School, Richmond, Va., and others who attended the Journalism Education Association's 1998 annual meeting, for field-testing some of the case studies. To Oline Stigers of *The Gazette* in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, we appreciate and value your expert advice.

The editorial cartoon on the cover of this curriculum guide was created for The Freedom Forum by Mike Ramirez, © 1994, editorial cartoonist for the *Los Angeles Times*.

The Center for International Leadership, Washington, D.C., provided the story titled "The Final Examination," page 7. Case study number 6, pages 37-38, titled "Is This Game Fair?" was adapted with permission from "But Isn't Football Sacred?" in "Drawing The Line: How 31 editors solved their toughest ethical dilemmas," published by the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Reston, Va., 1984.

The codes of ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists and the Radio-Television News Directors Association (pages 17-19) have been reprinted by permission of those organizations.

"The Ten Commandments of News" (page 20) from "Hold the Press: The Inside Story on Newspapers," was reprinted by permission, J. Hamilton and G. Krimsky, Louisiana State University press.

"Food Lion case shows that cameras, indeed, can lie," © 1999 by Philip Meyer, in *USA TODAY*, Feb. 17, 1999, was reprinted on page 51 by permission of the author.

Dear Educator:

There's an old saying that the three most important things in journalism are accuracy, accuracy and accuracy. Why? Because when a news organization makes mistakes, it hurts. It hurts the people who are described erroneously, it hurts the readers and viewers who have absorbed incorrect information and it hurts the credibility of the erring news organization and the industry.

In the United States, the press's immense power and influence are built largely on the idea that news organizations are trustworthy. Every day — at all times of the day — we rely on the press to give us the information we need to go about the business of daily living. But getting at the truth and providing accurate, fair and balanced news reports are complex tasks. Newspeople have to make hard choices in order to do their jobs.

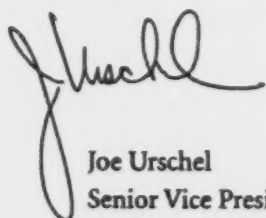
Here at the Newseum, the world's first interactive museum of news, we hope to help newspeople and news consumers better understand each other. That means discussing and debating the values of good journalism.

We hope you'll visit the Newseum and see for yourself. We've got more news under one roof than any other place in the world, from Pulitzer Prize-winning pieces to tabloid journalism. What better place to teach your students about the role of news media in a free society?

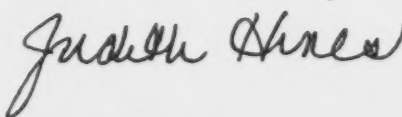
Even without a Newseum visit, you and your students can explore the complexities of everyday news decisions. That is why we have prepared this curriculum package, "Media Ethics: Where Do You Draw the Line?" Please accept and use it with our compliments.

We believe the Newseum is a bold, challenging learning place for students. We hope you will agree.

Sincerely,



Joe Urschel
Senior Vice President and
Executive Director



Judith Hines
Education Director

THE FAR SIDE

By GARY LARSON



THE FAR SIDE ©1990 FARWORKS, INC. USED BY PERMISSION. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

"You're so morbid, Jonathan — the paper comes, and that's the first section you always head for."

Although the material in this curriculum guide is copyrighted, you are encouraged to photocopy portions of it to suit your needs. In particular, we hope you will photocopy the reproducible pages to distribute to students. (These handouts and activities for students, appearing throughout this guide, are marked "reproducible pages.") You also may want to distribute some text passages offered throughout this guide.

Table of Contents

ABOUT "MEDIA ETHICS: WHERE DO YOU DRAW THE LINE?"

Target audience	2
Program goals	2
How to use this curriculum package	2

PART ONE: BACKGROUND FOR TEACHERS

What is news?	4
Why should students study the news?	4
Why study media ethics?	5
What is ethics, anyway?	6
Ethics in journalism — or journalism's do's, don'ts and dilemmas	11
Codes of ethics — yes or no?	15

PART TWO: TRANSPARENCIES

How to use the transparencies to introduce the case study approach	21
Example 1 — The story of Ruth Snyder	22
Example 2 — Terror in Oklahoma City	23
Example 3 — Watergate's "Deep Throat"	24
Example 4 — "Dateline NBC" crosses a line	25

PART THREE: CASE STUDIES

How to use the case studies	26
Case 1 — Did the story go too far?	27
Case 2 — Will fair but sensitive stories be allowed to air on student TV?	29
Case 3 — Should you publish this photo?	31
Case 4 — Detachment or involvement?	33
Case 5 — Making an editorial decision	35
Case 6 — Is this game fair?	37
Case 7 — Rush to judgment	39
Case 8 — Locker room luck	41
Case 9 — Up close and personal	43
Case 10 — If it bleeds, it leads	45
Case 11 — Should an editor protect young readers?	47
Case 12 — To what lengths should you go to get a story?	49

PART FOUR: WHEN TRAGEDY HITS — A TRUE STORY

How to use the role-playing exercise	52
--------------------------------------	----

PART FIVE: SOME FINAL WORDS

What about the Internet?	60
How are we to judge the truth?	61
What's a news organization to do?	66
Where to find more on media ethics at the Newseum	67
After your class completes "Media Ethics: Where Do You Draw the Line?"	68
Selected readings	69
About the author	70

About "Media Ethics: Where Do You Draw the Line?"

TARGET AUDIENCE

This teaching package has been designed for teachers and students in high school and college. It has been developed to give students an in-depth look at the media in the United States, with an emphasis on the values, standards and practices of good journalism. The material will have particular use in journalism courses as well as in social studies (history, government, political science, world geography) classes. Students who work on school publications or with electronic media will find the material of special interest, as will those interested in the history and future of communication.

PROGRAM GOALS

"Media Ethics: Where Do You Draw the Line?" has been developed to help your students:

- Ⓒ Understand the role of a free press in a free society; realize that good journalism seeks to bring readers and viewers closer to the truth by providing the latest, most factual information possible.
- Ⓒ Become informed, enthusiastic and intelligent news consumers who know how to assess news reports for accuracy, fairness and context.
- Ⓒ See ethical decision-making in journalism as a process, subject at times to individual judgments of reporters, editors and news directors, and at other times to policies and principles of news organizations.
- Ⓒ Recognize that the credibility of a news organization — its most important asset — can depend on ethical decision-making.
- Ⓒ Understand the role of ethics in journalism and use that knowledge to establish guidelines for ethical decision-making in their school publications.
- Ⓒ Think of the Newseum as a place to get behind the scenes and see how and why news is made.

HOW TO USE THIS CURRICULUM PACKAGE

"Media Ethics: Where Do You Draw the Line?" is a teaching package with the following components:

- Ⓒ This teacher's guide
- Ⓒ Transparencies containing cases from the Newseum's Ethics Center
- Ⓒ "Jonesboro: Were The Media Fair?" a report published by The Freedom Forum

We have used a case study approach to create "Media Ethics: Where Do You Draw the Line?" Although students will not find clear-cut, right or wrong answers as they go through this material, we hope that by putting themselves into the roles of reporters, editors and news directors, they will learn to appreciate the complexities and challenges faced by working journalists.

To make the best use of this curriculum package, please first read the background material in this teacher's guide. It provides a general discussion of media ethics and offers activities you can use to introduce this material to your students.

After discussing the basics of ethical decision-making, you probably will want to introduce some or all of the case studies (Parts Two, Three and Four of this guide). The logical order for using the material is to use the examples provided on transparencies first, then the case studies and finally the Jonesboro role-playing exercise. The last section (Part Five) in this teacher's guide offers exercises to reinforce what students have learned.

We recognize that the material in this package may be more than you are able to add to your curriculum. Here are some options:

FOR JOURNALISM TEACHERS and others who wish to teach a comprehensive unit on media ethics (about three full weeks of class time):

Days 1 and 2: Introduce "What is ethics, anyway?" and two student activities (see pages 6-10).

Days 3 and 4: Introduce "Journalism's do's, don'ts and dilemmas" (pages 12-13). Have students bring in examples from media they have surveyed, to see how they stack up against this list.

Day 5: Introduce "Codes of ethics — yes or no?" (see pages 15-20).

Day 6: Introduce example case studies by using transparencies in full class discussion (see pages 21-25).

Days 7 and 8: Introduce case studies, for small group discussion (see pages 26-51).

Days 9 and 10: Introduce "When tragedy hits — a true story," a role-playing exercise for the whole class (see pages 52-59).

Day 11: Class discussion on the Internet and its relationship to news dissemination (see pages 60-61); introduce "Tips for savvy news consumers" (see page 62).

Day 12: Introduce "Lessons to be learned" (pages 63-64).

Days 13 and 14: Introduce "What's a news organization to do?" and continuing activities in this teacher's guide (pages 66-68).

FOR SOCIAL STUDIES and other teachers who want an abbreviated approach to the topic (about one week of class time):

Day 1: Introduce "What is ethics, anyway?" and one student activity. (See page 6; select one activity from those offered on pages 7-10).

Days 2 and 3: Introduce "Journalism's do's, don'ts and dilemmas" (pages 12-13). Have students bring in examples from media they have surveyed, to see how they stack up against this list. Select one example from journalism's codes of ethics (pages 17-20) to introduce.

Day 4: Introduce case study approach by using transparencies in full class discussion. (See pages 21-25).

Day 5: Introduce "Tips for savvy news consumers" (page 62), "Lessons to be learned" (pages 63-64) and continuing activities in this teacher's guide (page 68).

FOR SOCIAL STUDIES and other teachers who have only a few days of class time:

Day 1: Introduce the topic by using transparencies in full class discussion (see pages 21-25).

Days 2 and 3: Introduce "Journalism's do's, don'ts and dilemmas" (pages 12-13). Have students bring in examples from media they have surveyed, to see how they stack up against this list. Introduce "Tips for savvy news consumers" (page 62) and "Lessons to be learned" (pages 63-64).

We hope these materials become springboards to further exploration and consideration of media practices by your students. By using this material and through continued analysis of news coverage, we believe your students will become sophisticated and savvy consumers of news, able to distinguish for themselves the hallmarks of good journalism.

Part One

BACKGROUND FOR TEACHERS

WHAT IS NEWS?

Many people would agree that a political scandal involving a U.S. president is the stuff of news. The same holds true for terrorist attacks on U.S. embassies in Africa or the plight of refugees from war-torn Kosovo.

Reports about the race to break baseball's single-season home run record most definitely are news. But what about baseball scores between rival high school teams? Is it news when the stock market goes up or down? What about articles on the latest fashions in back-to-school gear? Or stories about the clubs and coffee shops frequented by Chelsea Clinton and her college friends?

Mitchell Stephens, in "A History of News" (1997), explains that throughout the centuries, people have been fascinated with — and have hungered for — new information about life around them. More than 2,000 years ago citizens gathered in the Roman Forum to learn the latest news. Today they tune in to all-news television, read newspapers and magazines, and find it on the Internet. But the need is the same: We want to know "What's new?"

Journalists consider something newsworthy if it meets one or more of these standards: Is it timely? Is it unusual? Is it vital? Did it happen nearby? Did it involve a prominent person? Does it have human interest? Is there conflict? Emotion? Humor?

News is all around us, every day.

☉ **NEWS IS USEFUL:** We need it to know if a snowstorm is coming or what roads to take to avoid morning traffic. News helps us decide what movies we want to see, find out what type of food restaurants serve and learn what time the Fourth of July fireworks start.

☉ **NEWS IS IMPORTANT:** It helps us decide which candidate to support, what a change in tax laws means to our financial future, whether the school system's new language curriculum will work and how all these things relate to our lives.

☉ **NEWS IS INTERESTING:** It fills in the colors and details of our collective culture, community and lifestyles.

WHY SHOULD STUDENTS STUDY THE NEWS?

Studying the news, understanding it, sorting it out, learning which news outlets to trust — all these are part of becoming informed and savvy consumers of news.

We all *want to be informed*. We'd like to hold our own in conversations in the locker room or at the cafeteria lunch table. We need a useful, relevant, up-to-date and intelligent picture of the world. We have the right to make informed and reasoned decisions about issues that affect our lives. To do it all, we need accurate, reliable, timely news.

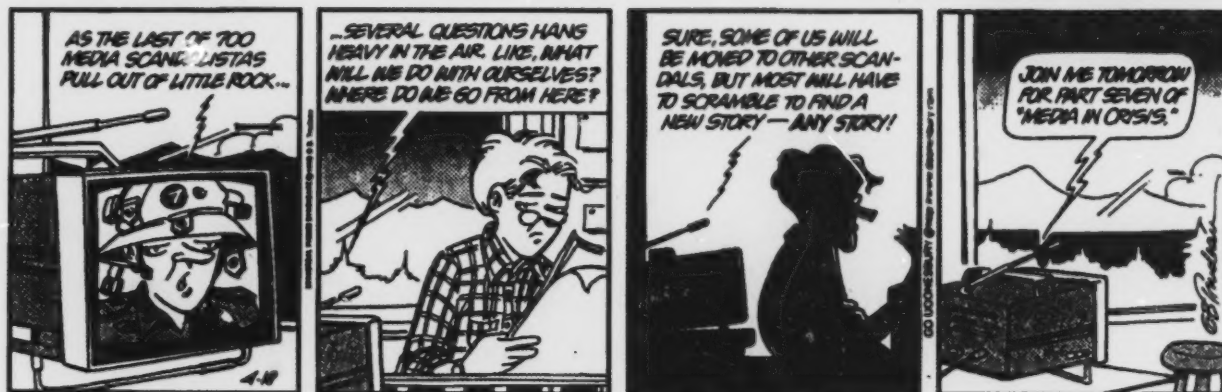
Our *need to know* drives us to search for news. But how do we make sense of it? We are bombarded with facts, opinion, commentary and analysis in newspapers, TV "infotainment" programs and newscasts, radio chitchat, and an endless string of words and images that scroll across our computer screens. No wonder we feel bewildered and frustrated. Is it too much to absorb?

Studying the news, understanding it, sorting it out, learning which news outlets to trust — all these are part of becoming informed and savvy consumers of news. We want accurate, fair and meaningful news.

What's more, we believe we have a *right to know*. Our free-press tradition encourages us to look everywhere for news. We can read the news,

Doonesbury

BY GARRY TRUDEAU



DOONESBURY ©1998 G. B. TRUDEAU. REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION OF UNIVERSAL PRESS SYNDICATE. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

watch it, listen to it, spread it, publish it and speak it. Thanks to the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, our press is generally free of government interference, ensuring that citizens have access to far more reliable information than they do in nations where censorship is the rule. Press freedom is the very bedrock of democracy; it enables us, and our free society, to thrive.

WHY STUDY MEDIA ETHICS?

By analyzing real-life examples, students can learn how journalists make decisions and how they try — but don't always succeed — to present fair and accurate news coverage.

Ask an average citizen about the term "media ethics" and you might get a puzzled look as an answer. Today, many people have become disenchanted with the practices and performance of journalists and news-gathering organizations.

Ironically, ethics standards for journalists have risen steadily during the 20th century. Yet the public's expectations have risen faster.

Americans are of a split mind when it comes to free and uninhibited media. We are glued to TV screens when important — or sensational — stories break. We download material straight from the Internet. We rush to newsstands for printed materials offering greater detail and analysis. We tune in — and call in — to talk shows on radio and TV. Newspaper circulation figures and television ratings rise dramatically. Yet even as

we empty newsstands of newspapers and news magazines, even as we overload our phone lines with Internet chatter, we criticize the very media that bring the news to us.

When, in 1992, a major newspaper asked tennis star Arthur Ashe whether he had AIDS, Ashe called a press conference to explain he had contracted the virus from tainted blood given to him during previous surgery. Ashe felt forced to reveal publicly such a private ordeal, and some criticized the newspaper for investigating the story.

In 1996, when a bomb killed people at the Atlanta Olympics, several media organizations named Richard Jewell, a 33-year-old security guard, as the most likely suspect. Eventually, Jewell was cleared of all charges but remained convinced his reputation had been ruined. Much of the public agreed, as did many in the media who called coverage about the bombing and Jewell's role in it "excessive" and "overblown." (However, the *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution* continues in its vigorous defense of its actions. In an ongoing suit Jewell brought against the paper, the newspaper insists everything it printed was true and should be grounds for dismissal of Jewell's case.)

Then, in September 1997, when Britain's Princess Diana was killed in a car crash in Paris, the first — and angriest — voices blamed the aggressive photographers who pursued the princess' every move. And for just about all of 1998, Americans were consumed with stories about President Clinton's extramarital liaisons with a young White

House intern. Yet many people accused the media of unwarranted intrusion in reporting about the president's private life.

And what stirs the ire of readers and viewers the most? When they perceive the media to have been intrusive. Or wrong. When the media fail to tell all sides of a story. When stories are superficial.

It falls to news organizations, then, to get it right. To be fair. To tell the whole story. To tell readers and viewers the news they want and need to hear.

To get it right. To be fair. To tell the whole story. These are the basic tenets of good journalism and the fundamentals of ethical decision-making by media organizations. Every day reporters, editors and news directors grapple with questions about accuracy, fairness and context in the stories they offer to the reading, viewing and listening public. Most times they do a good job. At other times, they fail in their judgments. News gathering and reporting are complex processes, full of ambiguities, questions and difficult decisions.

The material in this package offers teachers and students a chance to learn how news professionals make tough calls. Using case studies, students will play the roles of working journalists. Through class discussion and analysis, students will learn about journalistic standards and practices.

We hope this teaching package helps students understand that ethical decision-making is at the core of fair and accurate news reporting. And finally, we hope students will see that even with its mistakes, missteps and errors in judgment, a free press provides the best possible way to protect our democratic principles and our free society.

WHAT IS ETHICS, ANYWAY?

Ethics is a set of values. Determining what our ethical values are usually involves a process of asking ourselves questions so we can make good choices and right decisions. Our laws and rules (at work and at school) are examples of standards we attempt to impose on each other. But ultimately, each individual must decide for himself or herself, what is the right, and principled or honest, thing to do.

Ethics, derived from the Greek word *ethos*, refers to the principles or philosophy a person uses to make a decision. Which option is the right choice, which is wrong? Which approach would a person of good character take? Which is the fair way to handle a particular situation?

Ethics, then, may be defined as a *process* that we use to decide what's right or wrong, or how to go about making a good decision. This process usually involves asking a series of questions of ourselves: What would a person of good character do in such a situation? What option brings about the greatest good for the greatest number of people?

As individuals, we all operate with our own personal ethical values. On the surface, this may sound simple, but it is not always so. Sometimes, for example, we have conflicting loyalties. What are we to do when a good friend has violated our school's honor code? What should we say when asked to cover up another's indiscretions?

Please turn to pages 7-10. They contain two selections to help students understand the thought processes that individuals take when grappling with difficult decisions. Students will see that making ethics decisions is not always as easy as it seems, and that all decisions and actions have consequences. You may reproduce these pages for your students.

© PAGES 7-8, "The final examination," is an edited version of an essay by a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy. He writes about a conflict he faced between the school's honor code and the ruin he might bring to a classmate's potential career.

© PAGES 9-10, "Abraham Lincoln's letter to Horace Greeley," was written in 1862 to the *New York Tribune* editor. Students will see how Lincoln perceived his official duties to be of greater importance than his individual beliefs. Here Lincoln writes that his paramount concern is to save the Union, even if it means sacrificing his personal desire to free the slaves.

© The final examination

Read this story and answer the questions about it that appear on the following page.

The great auditorium of the U.S. Naval Academy is full. Blue uniforms, straight backs, eyes focused on the examining officer and silence, the silence of expectation.

I'm among the crowd. These examinations are crucial. With our grades and physical fitness reports, this final exam will make or break us. Tension hangs over the room like a dark cloud.

I know Jim only from tennis. He plays a good game, but isn't a good sport. He always wants to count in his favor balls that are difficult to judge. Every line ball judged by the umpire to be at his disadvantage he questions; he also will curse and throw his racket in disgust. I avoid him.

When I approach my seat in the examination room I notice Jim sitting next to me. Our last names are alphabetically close. We nod to each other and await the test. We have clean sheets of paper in front of us. We know the time allotted for the first round. We all stand when the officer enters the room. Military discipline and customs always prevail.

Totally focused on my work, it's about half an hour before I lift my eyes. I notice Jim's eyes; they are focused on one point — a piece of paper on his knees. I can't believe what I see: Right in front of me, a classmate — a fellow future officer — openly cheating. On his knees are answers to the exam.

I finish my own paper without saying a word to Jim or to anyone else. I go to the privacy of my room where in solitude I face my moral dilemma. We all are bound by two oaths: One is a promise to be honest and never to cheat; the other, to report those who do. Should I report Jim? Testify against him at the court of inquiry? Ruin his career? Deny him his commission? Or should I just look the other way and mind my own business?

There are two friends whose counsel I seek. They listen and strongly advise me to do nothing. "OK, so you'll feel good about doing what the academy wants you to do," they say.

"But he's one of your pals; he is one of us. Did you know he's planning to get married shortly after graduation? His bride-to-be may have second thoughts should he be expelled or denied a diploma. Can you, in your own mind, really justify cutting him at the knees?"

I ask meekly: "Do you remember how he plays tennis? How he is always bent toward his own game? How he denies his outs? His errors?"

They remember. Their views of the man are less than favorable; yet they both think this might have been the only time he's ever cheated on a test. The punishment will be too harsh.

I do not report him. We both graduate on the same day and he invites me to his wedding. I decline.

Am I right?

It comes back to haunt me a decade later. We are both in Vietnam. I am assigned to Saigon at headquarters. Jim is commanding a patrol boat. One day, a report lands on my desk with a request to begin court-martial procedures. An officer commanding a patrol boat mishandled an attack against an enemy base. The boat came under heavy fire and 10 men died. The officer had acted recklessly, against the advice of the second-in-command.

Jim is court-martialed. But 10 men go home in body bags. Am I indirectly responsible for their deaths? If I had reported Jim after the examination he never would have been commissioned; he never would have had a command in Vietnam. Maybe he never would have been there.

I keep thinking about it, reproaching myself. I'm haunted by nightmares in which 10 dead men point their fingers at me and ask, "Why were you not faithful to the academy's oath?"

Am I responsible?

© The final examination (continued)

FOR DISCUSSION:

Imagine you can turn the clock back. You are now the person who has written this essay, taking the final exam. You see Jim cheating and seek the counsel of your friends. But ultimately, you decide to be true to the academy's oath. You report him.

© Use the space below to write a few paragraphs describing how things might have turned out in such a scenario. Be sure to describe the reactions of your friends when they learn of your decision, and your feelings when Jim is denied his diploma, his career and possibly, his bride. Also dream up a vignette about Jim's life, 10 years after this episode.

© Share what you wrote with the class. How many different endings did your classmates create? After you've heard several scenarios, evaluate some of the options available to the young man — the one he described and the ones you and your classmates imagined.

© Did one choice prove to be better — more ethical, more principled — than the others, in your view? Why or why not?

© What does this exercise tell you, if anything, about the ethics of decision-making?

© Abraham Lincoln's letter to Horace Greeley

President Lincoln wrote this letter in answer to "The Prayer of Twenty Millions," an open letter from New-York Daily Tribune editor Horace Greeley. Read the letter and answer the questions that follow on the next page.

Executive Mansion
Washington, August 22, 1862

Hon. Horace Greeley:

Dear Sir:

I have just read yours of the 19th, addressed to myself through The N.Y. Tribune. If there be in it any statements, or assumptions of fact, which I may know to be erroneous, I do not now and here controvert them. If there be in it any inferences which I may believe to be falsely drawn, I do not now and here argue against them. If there be perceptible in it an impatient and dictatorial tone, I waive it in deference to an old friend, whose heart I have always supposed to be right.

As to the policy I "seem to be pursuing," as you say, I have not meant to leave any one in doubt.

I would save the Union. I would save it the shortest way under the Constitution. The sooner the National authority can be restored, the nearer the Union will be "the Union as it was." If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time *save* Slavery, I do not agree with them. If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time *destroy* Slavery, I do not agree with them. My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is *not* either to save or to destroy Slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves, I would do it; and if I could do it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that. What I do about Slavery and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do *not* believe it would help to save the Union. I shall do *less* whenever I shall believe what I am doing hurts the cause, and I shall do *more* whenever I shall believe doing more will help the cause. I shall try to correct errors when shown to be errors; and I shall adopt new views so fast as they shall appear to be true views. I have here stated my purpose according to my view of *official* duty, and I intend no modification of my oft-expressed *personal* wish that all men, everywhere, could be free.

Yours,

A. Lincoln

© Abraham Lincoln's letter to Horace Greeley (continued)

FOR DISCUSSION:

© What is the essential nature of the conflict Lincoln faced as he chose his course of action? Why do you think he chose this route?

Review the passage in Lincoln's letter that reads "I shall do less whenever I shall believe what I am doing hurts the cause, and I shall do more whenever I shall believe doing more will help the cause ... and I shall adopt new views so fast as they shall appear to be true views." Put yourself in Abraham Lincoln's place, and imagine you are planning to articulate a motto or credo that would drive your actions. Write a one-sentence motto that Lincoln might have drafted for himself:

© Compare Lincoln's decision-making with the decision made in 1980 by President Jimmy Carter, when he decided not to allow U.S. athletes to participate in the Moscow Olympics as a way to protest the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. Or use another important presidential decision of your choosing. How are the two decisions alike? How are they different?

Would the motto you have crafted for Lincoln also have worked for President Carter? If not, write a credo that Carter might have followed:

© In 1939, first lady Eleanor Roosevelt took a stand against the Daughters of the American Revolution, an organization of some prominence at the time. The DAR had refused to allow Marian Anderson, a black opera singer and concert performer, to perform in its Constitution Hall. Eleanor Roosevelt arranged for Anderson to perform instead on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial before an audience of 75,000 people. Roosevelt also dropped her membership in the DAR.

Do some research to find out the impact of Eleanor Roosevelt's actions on public opinion at the time, on Marian Anderson's career and on the policies of the DAR. Jot some notes here and then use another sheet of paper to write a few paragraphs about your findings.

© "Each day we must publish a newspaper that makes us proud, but not so proud that we forget that it is not our newspaper, but our readers'.

To accomplish that, we must: Be fresh; be informative, be inviting, be accurate and fair, be appetizing; be clear; be imaginative; be unselfish.

Care. Care. Care.

Take it and show it."

— JOHN C. (CHIPS) QUINN JR., 1955–1990; editor, *The Poughkeepsie (N.Y.) Journal*, in a 1990 memo to his newsroom.

ETHICS IN JOURNALISM — OR JOURNALISM'S DO'S, DON'TS AND DILEMMAS

"Do The Right Thing" said filmmaker Spike Lee, in a 1989 film decrying the insidious effects of racial prejudice. But many times in life, doing the right thing is not an easy task. Often there are no simple answers; issues may not be clear cut. Making ethical decisions generally requires us to ponder many sides of a question, to apply reasoned analysis, to avoid rushing to judgment. Most often, we rely on our own intuition, on gut feelings, going beyond rules of law, custom and convention.

Manners and morals refer to the way people behave in society. In professions, we often see certain value systems and standards of behavior at work. In the medical profession, for example, doctors learn of the Hippocratic oath, which encourages them always to be healers of the sick. In the legal profession, lawyers know their first obligation is to protect their clients' best interests. And ethics, in all these examples, helps a practitioner analyze value systems and decide for himself or herself just how to approach a complex question.

What about the profession of journalism? It is hard to be a good journalist, to present stories in a clear and consistent manner and to search for the truth. Yet despite the difficulties inherent in

their jobs, most journalists try to write and report honestly, hoping to gain the public's trust by virtue of fair reporting. And most would agree that there are certain fundamental values in the profession of journalism, even though there may be scores of ways of expressing those values.

On pages 12-13 are some "do's, don'ts and dilemmas" of journalism. They are presented here as a shorthand way of describing basic values of good journalism. We invite you to reproduce pages 12-13 or convert them into an overhead for class discussion.

On page 14 is a column, written by The Freedom Forum Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Charles L. Overby, that offers students a succinct and clear description of media fairness — and how and why it is to be achieved. Again, you may reproduce those pages for your students.

FOR DISCUSSION:

© Once your students have considered the "do's, don'ts and dilemmas" and "ABCs" of reporting, you may want to ask them to collect examples of newspaper, television and on-line news stories. They should bring the examples to class for discussion and analysis. Do the reports seem to be accurate, fair and balanced? Did the news stories use named or anonymous sources? Has someone's privacy been invaded? Is the reporting sensational? Is it newsworthy?

© Journalism's do's, don'ts and dilemmas

JOURNALISM'S DO'S

ACCURACY: Make sure the facts are right and the right facts are there. Tell who, what, when, where, how and why. Verify, verify, verify.

FAIRNESS: Make sure to present all sides, arguments and opinions. Make sure readers and viewers know what's being presented as opinion and what's being presented as fact.

CONTEXT: Tell the whole story. Frame it in the proper background. Give readers and viewers a sense of why the story is important at this time, in this place. This includes deciding what is newsworthy, offering news in the public interest as well as news that interests the public.

TRUTH: Keep reporting, one piece at a time. Let the facts fall where they may, and you'll give readers and viewers a chance to begin to find the truth. Understand that no one person has a monopoly on truth, that we can only search for data, events, issues and ideas to help readers and viewers form their own opinions.

JOURNALISM'S DON'TS

PLAGIARISM: Never use the words and ideas of another without giving credit to the source.

SLOPPY REPORTING: Don't fail to check the facts. Don't forget to check all sides of the story. Don't forget to verify, verify, verify. Don't overlook relevant details — the who, what, when, where, how and why.

BIAS: Don't allow your news reports to be influenced by your own opinions. Even if you think you're right, let others make their case.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST: Don't report a story if you are not completely independent of that story.

POOR NEWS JUDGMENT: Don't offer news to readers and viewers that is irrelevant to their lives and their interests. Don't blow things out of proportion to attract higher ratings and readership.

DECEPTION: Never, never invent characters, quotations or any part of a story. The moment you make things up, or, deliberately lie, you no longer are a journalist.

JOURNALISM'S DILEMMAS

ANONYMOUS SOURCES are people who supply or "leak" information to you on the condition that you will not mention their names or identities as the sources of information in your story.

If you use anonymous sources, make sure to consider whether the people you're talking with have an "ax to grind." Ask yourself: Are they bitter about something? Out to hurt another party? Remember: It is easy to make false charges under a cloak of anonymity. If you can get your sources to go on the record — agree to be identified — you'll give readers and viewers a way to judge for themselves the reliability of information presented.

MISREPRESENTATION occurs when you pretend to be someone other than a journalist or use deceptive tactics to get a story.

Some news people think that using certain deceptive tactics (e.g., hidden cameras) is acceptable if that is the only way to get an important story. Whenever deceptive tactics are used, many news organizations take pains to ensure they've exhausted all other possible means of getting the story. Journalists should check with higher-ups in their organizations before they resort to these methods and should be open about their techniques when the stories are reported.

LACK OF REGARD FOR PRIVACY occurs when you reveal facts of a personal nature about someone and many readers and viewers think you have invaded that person's privacy.

Most people believe they can control the information revealed about them. Other people — elected officials, movie stars, famous athletes — give up some of their privacy when they enter public life. In general, if information about a person is of interest to the public, it is thought to be newsworthy and "fair game" for reporters. However, news media sometimes face negative reactions from readers and viewers when they appear reckless in their pursuit of what is thought to be personal information about public people.

© Journalism's do's, don'ts and dilemmas (continued)

SENSATIONALISM occurs when you offer news coverage designed to titillate or entertain more than to inform.

In 1995, the heavily covered criminal trial of O.J. Simpson was called sensational journalism; many analysts agreed that coverage was excessive and overblown. Yet people clamored for more and more information about the double murders of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman and about the famous football star accused of the crimes. And in 1998, revelations about President Clinton's personal life both turned readers off and had them absorbing all the details.

© Fairness formula starts with accuracy

By Charles L. Overby

People who talk with The Freedom Forum about news complain that the media can and should do a better job.

Most news people tell us the same thing.

So what's the problem?

A lack of attention to basics.

In meetings with small groups around the country, we encouraged people to talk about fairness in the media.

The topic quickly became a broad umbrella for complaints in general about the media. Most of the complaints focused on the basics of newsgathering and presentation.

From those discussions, I have broken down the components of fairness into five basic categories that provide an easy-to-remember formula: $A+B+C+D+E=F$ (FAIRNESS).

Accuracy + balance + completeness + detachment + ethics = fairness.

There are other ways to state it, but these five categories generally capture most of the complaints we have heard about the need for fairness and improvement in the media.

Many editors and news directors may think the components are so basic that their news reports meet those standards easily.

But many of the people whom we interviewed do not think so.

The public expects all five categories — not two or three — to be applied to all news stories.

A quick look at the five categories:

ACCURACY — This is the basic component of fairness, but it generates lots of discussion, especially in the area of corrections. Most newspapers still do a superficial job of

correcting their errors. Procedures often are not reader-friendly. The better newspapers run more corrections, not fewer, every day than average newspapers. Forget corrections when it comes to television.

BALANCE — Many in the public think stories reflect definite points of view. Often, the other side is given scant, secondary attention, far down in the news report.

COMPLETENESS — This was the biggest complaint that we heard. Our respondents said reporters fail to tell the whole story because of inexperience, ineptitude, laziness or lack of space or time. The lack of completeness affects context.

DETACHMENT — A frequent complaint lodged by people who deal with the media was that reporters and editors construct their stories in advance and only want news sources to confirm their preconceived notions. Once the news "hook" is established, there is not much fair and open reporting that follows.

ETHICS — This involves the way reporters and editors pursue stories, the feeling that editorial viewpoints drive news content, placement and headlines. This category also focuses on the methodology of reporting, ranging from paparazzi photography to insensitivity to victims.

These five areas need more discussion in newsrooms.

If the public could see improvements and regular explanations about these basic elements, they probably would develop more trust in the mainstream media.

This isn't rocket science. Every editor and news director should be capable of identifying ways to improve these deficiencies.

For those news executives who think they are doing just fine in all these categories, bring in a dozen readers or viewers and ask them.

Charles L. Overby is chairman and chief executive officer of The Freedom Forum.

CODES OF ETHICS — YES OR NO?

"The supreme test of good journalism is the measure of its public service."

—Walter Williams, School of Journalism
University of Missouri, 1908-1935

Mention the phrase "codes of ethics" in a room full of journalists and you're sure to start an argument.

Given that journalists tend to agree on basic concepts — fairness, accuracy, context, truth — a nonjournalist might think a code of ethics should spell out practices journalists should follow. But the fact is, codes of ethics remain controversial.

Many reporters, editors and news directors believe that codes of ethics are essential guideposts to good journalism. Others believe that codes of ethics are impossible to enforce and difficult to follow; thus, they ask, why bother having them? This line of thinking suggests that each dilemma a reporter faces as he or she pursues a story must be judged as an individual case, dependent on the circumstances in which it arises.

Some news executives worry about hard and fast "rules." These might invite lawsuits if subjects of stories claimed that journalists failed to follow set guidelines. Other executives say ethics are a matter

of company policy, not individual responsibility. And free press advocates bristle at the mere idea of codes of ethics; no one, they say, not even fellow journalists, can spell out exactly how a story should be pursued.

Yet every other profession has its standards. If reporting is to be accurate, fair and full, shouldn't journalists have guideposts to help them along the way?

Please turn to pages 17-20. Reprinted, so you may duplicate them for students, are codes of ethics from two media organizations, and one other list of "proper" behavior for journalists.

FOR DISCUSSION:

© What do you think about codes of ethics for working journalists? Compare the various codes and statements you have read and explain which, if any, would be most helpful to a beginning journalist.

© Some people believe that, rather than following a written code of ethics, every journalist must develop for himself or herself a set of questions and personal guidelines to follow. Journalists must ask themselves, when they go out each day to do their work, "What would a good and honest person do in this situation?" and then behave accordingly.

Look again at the Society of Professional Journalists' code of ethics, paying particular attention to the boldface headings:

Seek Truth and Report It
Minimize Harm
Act Independently
Be Accountable

Discuss these principles with a partner and together develop a set of questions that you would like to see journalists ask themselves as they go about the business of reporting the news.



BY DON WRIGHT
TRIBUNE MEDIA SERVICES, INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION.

© Recently, the American Society of Newspaper Editors took a strong stance *against* an international code of ethics developed by the Press Council of Turkey and others. "While ASNE believes all media should operate with high standards, it has learned from experience that agreements on standards and their enforcement, even voluntary ones, are dangerous for press freedom," said Edward L. Seaton, editor of the *Manhattan (Kan.) Mercury* and president of the editors' association. "What is intended as voluntary becomes coercive."

Do some research on the way media operate in other countries to see if you can determine why ASNE took such a strong stand. Also look up and read the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Then organize a debate in class on the following topic; be sure to explore both sides of the question.

Resolved: That the United States government should/should not support adoption of an international code of ethics pertaining to the press. In class discussion, consider how such a code would be enforced. What would the enforcement do to press freedom?

© Ask students to think about the ways in which ethics differ from laws. In an April 1998 presentation at the Silha Center National Media Ethics and Law Conference, Louis W. Hodges of the department of journalism at Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Va., explained:

"Those behaviors that law prohibits (e.g., murder, theft, assault) were morally wrong and were recognized to be so, long before sovereign states created laws prohibiting them."

And, continued Hodges, "Complexity is inherent in law. Here's proof: The Lord's Prayer is 66 words, the Gettysburg Address is 286 words, and there are only 1,322 words in the Declaration of Independence. But government regulations on the sale of cabbage total 26,911 words."

In other words, Hodges believes that sometimes laws, with all their detail, complicate life. It would be much easier, Hodges contends, simply to behave morally and ethically. Students might want to comment on this proposition.



TRIBUNE MEDIA SERVICES, INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION.



Code of Ethics

Preamble

Members of the Society of Professional Journalists believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues. Conscientious journalists from all media and specialties strive to serve the public with thoroughness and honesty. Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility. Members of the Society share a dedication to ethical behavior and adopt this code to declare the Society's principles and standards of practice.

Seek Truth and Report It

Journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.

Journalists should:

- Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is never permissible.
- Diligently seek out subjects of news stories to give them the opportunity to respond to allegations of wrongdoing.
- Identify sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources' reliability.
- Always question sources' motives before promising anonymity. Clarify conditions attached to any promise made in exchange for information. Keep promises.
- Make certain that headlines, news teases and promotional material, photos, video, audio, graphics, sound bites and quotations do not misrepresent. They should not oversimplify or highlight incidents out of context.
- Never distort the content of news photos or video. Image enhancement for technical clarity is always permissible. Label montages and photo illustrations.
- Avoid misleading re-enactments or staged news events. If re-enactment is necessary to tell a story, label it.
- Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information except when traditional open

methods will not yield information vital to the public. Use of such methods should be explained as part of the story.

- Never plagiarize.
- Tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so.
- Examine their own cultural values and avoid imposing those values on others.
- Avoid stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status.
- Support the open exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.
- Give voice to the voiceless; official and unofficial sources of information can be equally valid.
- Distinguish between advocacy and news reporting. Analysis and commentary should be labeled and not misrepresent fact or context.
- Distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two.
- Recognize a special obligation to ensure that the public's business is conducted in the open and that government records are open to inspection.

Continued on next page.



Code of Ethics

(continued)

Minimize harm

Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect.

Journalists should:

- Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage. Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects.
- Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.
- Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance.
- Recognize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials and others who seek power, influence or attention. Only an overriding public need can justify intrusion into anyone's privacy.
- Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity.
- Be cautious about identifying juvenile suspects or victims of sex crimes.
- Be judicious about naming criminal suspects before the formal filing of charges.
- Balance a criminal suspect's fair trial rights with the public's right to be informed.

Act Independently

Journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know.

Journalists should:

- Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived.
- Remain free of associations and activities that may compromise integrity or damage credibility.
- Refuse gifts, favors, fees, free travel and special treatment, and shun secondary employment, political involvement, public office and service in community organizations if they compromise journalistic integrity.
- Disclose unavoidable conflicts.
- Be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable.
- Deny favored treatment to advertisers and special interests and resist their pressure to influence news coverage.
- Be wary of sources offering information for favors or money; avoid bidding for news.

Be Accountable

Journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and each other.

Journalists should:

- Clarify and explain news coverage and invite dialogue with the public over journalistic conduct.
- Encourage the public to voice grievances against the news media.
- Admit mistakes and correct them promptly.
- Expose unethical practices of journalists and the news media.
- Abide by the same high standards to which they hold others.

Sigma Delta Chi's first Code of Ethics was borrowed from the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1926. In 1973, Sigma Delta Chi wrote its own code, which was revised in 1984 and 1987. The present version of the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics was adopted in September 1996.

© Radio-Television News Directors Association

Code of Ethics

The responsibility of radio and television journalists is to gather and report information of importance and interest to the public accurately, honestly and impartially.

The members of the Radio-Television News Directors Association accept these standards and will:

1. Strive to present the source or nature of broadcast news material in a way that is balanced, accurate and fair.

A. They will evaluate information solely on its merits as news, rejecting sensationalism or misleading emphasis in any form.

B. They will guard against using audio or video material in a way that deceives the audience.

C. They will not mislead the public by presenting as spontaneous news any material which is staged or rehearsed.

D. They will identify people by race, creed, nationality or prior status only when it is relevant.

E. They will clearly label opinion and commentary.

F. They will promptly acknowledge and correct errors.

2. Strive to conduct themselves in a manner that protects them from conflicts of interest, real or perceived. They will decline gifts or favors which would influence or appear to influence their judgments.

3. Respect the dignity, privacy and well-being of people with whom they deal.

4. Recognize the need to protect confidential sources. They will promise confidentiality only with the intention of keeping that promise.

5. Respect everyone's right to a fair trial.

6. Broadcast the private transmissions of other broadcasters only with permission.

7. Actively encourage observance of this Code by all journalists, whether members of the Radio-Television News Directors Association or not.

— March 1990

© The Ten Commandments of News

Reprinted, with permission, from "Hold the Press: The Inside Story on Newspapers" by John Maxwell Hamilton and George A. Krinsky.

An informal code of ethics governs journalists. Informal is a key word here. No single uniform code of behavior regulates the profession. Several journalism associations as well as individual newspapers and newspaper groups have their own list of "don'ts." None has the force of law. But they are remarkably similar, signaling at least consensus on right and wrong.

Here are ten things most journalists would say they are not supposed to do:

1. Lie in print or on the air (this also means not using new technology to alter photos)
2. Lie to or threaten a source

3. Report rumors or other unverified information
4. Suppress or omit opinion with which one disagrees
5. Show favoritism or personal bias in one's reporting or writing
6. Misrepresent oneself or use deception to get a story (without having very powerful reasons to do so)
7. Plagiarize words or ideas (journalists can use the words with attribution)
8. Tap or tape telephone conversations without permission
9. Use one's position for personal gain (e.g., accepting gifts from sources)
10. Do anything that may be construed as a "conflict of interest" (e.g., write political speeches for the candidate being covered in an election)

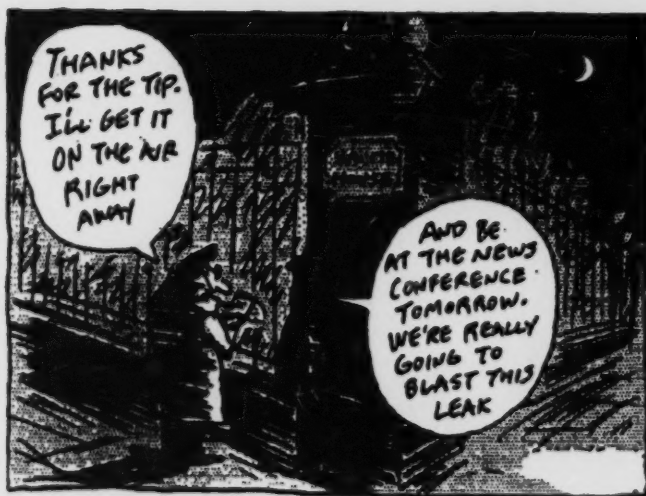
Part Two

TRANSPARENCIES

HOW TO USE THE TRANSPARENCIES TO INTRODUCE THE CASE STUDY APPROACH

"Media Ethics: Where Do You Draw the Line?" offers four transparencies to use with your class. Each transparency includes a photo and text to illustrate a real-life situation faced by a news organization. Below the text are alternatives for consideration; students should decide which option they would choose if they were journalists in these situations.

Please turn to the inside back cover of this curriculum guide to find the transparencies.



BY STAYSKAL FOR THE TAMPA TRIBUNE
TRIBUNE MEDIA SERVICES, INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION.

The cases presented on the transparencies are from the Newseum's Ethics Center, where visitors use touch-screen computers to record their answers. After making their selections, visitors can compare their answers to those of other Newseum visitors. Included in this guide are:

- EXAMPLE 1 — The story of Ruth Snyder
- EXAMPLE 2 — Terror in Oklahoma City
- EXAMPLE 3 — Watergate's "Deep Throat"
- EXAMPLE 4 — *Dateline* NBC crosses a line

Explain to students that they will discuss, as a group, some real-life situations faced by media organizations. Project each transparency so all students can see the photo and read the text. Use the material on the following pages to guide each discussion.

FOR USE WITH THE TRANSPARENCY:

EXAMPLE 1 The story of Ruth Snyder

This example highlights the issues of hidden cameras and sensationalism, and helps students understand that these have been topics of discussion among journalists for some time.

Show the transparency to the class, using an overhead projector. Review Options A, B and C presented on the transparency.

© Ask students how many chose option A. Option B? Option C?

© Do a rough calculation of percentages of students who picked each answer and then tell students how visitors to the Newseum made their selections:

In a one-year period, 29% of the people who answered the question picked option A, 31% picked option B and 39% went for option C.

© Ask students: How are current-day executions generally covered by the news media?

Duplicate the "real story" for students or read it aloud.

FOR DISCUSSION:

© What are the pros and cons of printing a photograph of an execution?

© Consider a recent related example: In 1998, "60 Minutes," a CBS program, aired a videotape of Dr. Jack Kevorkian administering a lethal injection to a terminally ill man. Should CBS have included the video in its broadcast? How do you explain the fact that "60 Minutes" attracted its biggest audience of the season, even though many CBS affiliates did not air it? (Kevorkian subsequently was tried and convicted of murdering the man in the broadcast.)

THE REAL STORY

On Jan. 12, 1928, Ruth Snyder, a New York woman convicted of murdering her husband, was electrocuted at Sing Sing Prison.

Tom Howard, then photographer for the *Chicago Tribune*, was "imported" by the *New York Daily News* so he could sit, unrecognized, with newspaper reporters at the execution.

Howard had a miniature camera strapped to his ankle. He photographed the electrocution, pulling off the most famous sneak shot in journalism.

The *Daily News* splashed the picture across the front page with the screaming headline, "DEAD!" The paper sold a million extra copies, double its normal newsstand sales.

This sensational coverage was widely condemned, but not among *Daily News* readers; only a handful wrote to complain.

This incident led prison officials nationwide to tighten surveillance of all who witness executions. No state then or now has allowed the photographing of executions. But some journalists keep asking for permission. They argue that people have a right to witness the death penalty in operation.

EXAMPLE 2 Terror in Oklahoma City

This example shows how stereotypes and biases occasionally make their way into news accounts, and what may happen as a result.

Project the transparency on an overhead, and discuss the options presented. Compare your students' selections with the way Newseum visitors, in the museum's first year, answered the questions:

About one-quarter of the respondents (24%) picked option A. A large majority (75%) chose option B.

FOR DISCUSSION:

© When is it "relevant" to identify people by race and when is it not?

© Look for examples of racial or ethnic identifications in newspapers, news magazines and on television; in your opinion, are there any cases when these identifications are not needed? Also look for examples of stories about people where race and ethnicity are not included; has your understanding or interpretation of these stories been hampered in any way?

THE REAL STORY

April 19, 1995. It was a sunny morning in America's heartland. Mothers and fathers had just dropped off their children at a day-care center in the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City. The work day was beginning. And ending. Shortly after 9 a.m., a bomb ripped the north face off the nine-story federal building. Hundreds of people were injured. One hundred sixty-eight people died.

The governor said the FBI was looking for three people in a brown pickup truck, all reported to be of Middle East origin. Within hours, a former Oklahoma congressman appeared on national television to say that the most likely suspects were Islamic radicals. News media immediately quoted "terrorism experts" who compared this bombing with the 1993 World Trade Center blast, which was carried out by an Islamic group.

Ibrahim Ahmad was an Oklahoma City computer technician who happened to be flying to Jordan to see his family when he suddenly became a suspect in the bombing. Ahmad was stopped in London and questioned by the FBI. He was arrested, handcuffed and flown back to the United States, where his computer equipment was searched and he endured more interrogation before being released.

Muslims and Arab-Americans were declared guilty of the Oklahoma City bombing almost from the beginning. There were bomb threats, harassing phone calls and vandalism against Muslim groups, mosques and Arab-Americans throughout the United States.

Just two days after the bombing, federal authorities arrested 27-year-old Timothy McVeigh, a white American who was a decorated Army veteran with ties to paramilitary groups. Today, McVeigh has been tried and convicted in connection with the bombing along with another white American, Terry Lynn Nichols. At the time, though, there was shock that such deadly sabotage had no foreign origin or foreign face. Journalists were accused of everything from arrogance to prejudice. Arab-American groups said news reports perpetuated ethnic stereotyping.

Many codes of ethics say that journalists should avoid stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity or geography, and should only identify people by race, creed or nationality when it is relevant. The codes also say journalists should admit mistakes and correct them promptly.

EXAMPLE 3 Watergate's "Deep Throat"

This example recounts a remarkable period in journalism's history, when two reporters, relying on information given to them by a source who insisted on remaining anonymous, uncovered duplicity and obstruction of justice by an American president and his aides. This case helps students see how important it is for journalists to check and double check information passed to them by sources, especially anonymous ones.

Project the transparency on an overhead. Compare your students' selections with those selected by Newseum visitors:

© Some 13% chose option A; 20% chose option B and 66% selected option C, recognizing the crucial role anonymous sources often play in a story of major importance.

FOR DISCUSSION:

© Do you think *The Washington Post's* two-source rule still holds true today for most news organizations? Explain your answer.

THE REAL STORY

Following a break-in at the Democratic National Headquarters in the Watergate office complex in June 1972, *The Washington Post* began its long and persistent coverage of the greatest political scandal in American history.

Owing in large part to the *Post*, the Watergate scandal — an illegal White House plot to spy on and sabotage President Richard Nixon's political enemies — led the president to resign in 1974.

The two young reporters credited with this story were Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward. Woodward had a secret source in the executive branch. The source's identity remains a mystery even today. Woodward promised never to reveal the source's name and never to quote him, even as an anonymous source. The source guided the reporters by confirming some facts and revealing others. In journalism jargon, using such a source means that discussions are on "deep background." Thus, the nickname for Woodward's famous Watergate source: "Deep Throat."

The use of anonymous sources is hotly debated. Those who use them say people will never tell the whole truth unless they are protected from retaliation. Those who don't use them say unnamed sources can misuse their shield of anonymity. Although codes of ethics say keeping secrets is often a necessary part of a reporter's job, the codes also advise journalists to question sources' motives before promising anonymity. Once granted anonymity, sources might manipulate reporters for their own ends. Some news organizations have policies requiring reporters to identify sources.

In the case of Watergate, *The Washington Post* had a rule: All leads had to be confirmed by two sources. Executive Editor Ben Bradlee later recalled that many people wondered "how the *Post* dared ride over the constant denials of the president of the United States and the attorney general" as well as top presidential aides. Bradlee replied that the *Post* knew its information was correct. Leads from "Deep Throat" as well as other well-protected sources consistently checked out. Tapes of Nixon's conversations show that *The Washington Post* was right.

EXAMPLE 4 "Dateline NBC" crosses a line

"Dateline NBC" rigged an explosion to produce a compelling TV story, but damaged its credibility with viewers by doing so. This case shows how news media alienate their audiences if they misrepresent the facts or fail to tell the whole story.

Project the transparency on an overhead. Compare your students' selections with those selected by Newseum visitors:

© Nearly one-third of the visitors (29%) said to "scrap the story" (option A). Only 14% thought "Dateline NBC" should have rigged the pickup to explode (option B) and a majority (55%) chose option C, suggesting that NBC should have told viewers that the on-screen explosion was a simulation.

FOR DISCUSSION:

© If the trucks were flawed, would that justify NBC's use of faked video? Do the ends (bringing to light serious defects in the trucks) justify the means (deceiving the viewers)?

THE REAL STORY

On Nov. 17, 1992, "Dateline NBC" reported that older model General Motors pickup trucks can explode on side impact. NBC reported that GM knew the pickups had a design defect. The network aired claims that this defect led to the death of a teen-ager.

The "Dateline NBC" broadcast featured alarming video of a pickup truck exploding into flames.

General Motors sued NBC. The pickups are safe, GM said. Reluctantly, "Dateline NBC" producers admitted they had faked the explosion. Producers rigged pickups with tiny rockets and sparking devices. Yet, when the video aired on "Dateline," there was no explanation of how the vehicle had been ignited.

GM dropped its lawsuit after NBC agreed to give the automaker \$2 million and make an on-air apology. NBC conducted its own inquiry into the embarrassing episode. Several people left the network, including the president of NBC News, who resigned to "take the spotlight off."

In 1996, GM agreed to settle dozens of class-action lawsuits by giving every owner of the estimated 5 million 1973-87 pickups still on the road a \$1,000 certificate toward the purchase of a new vehicle.

Part Three

CASE STUDIES

HOW TO USE THE CASE STUDIES

Please turn to pages 27-51. They contain 12 short case studies, offered for your students' analysis. Each case gives a brief accounting of a real-life situation faced by a news organization. After a short description of the ethical dilemma, the cases pose questions to students.

Most of the cases describe situations that occurred in the professional media; two cases involved student publications.

Each case fills one page. On one side is the case; duplicate it for distribution to the students. On the reverse is the "real story," followed by additional discussion questions. Once the groups have reported their conclusions, you may want to read aloud the real story for that case. Or you might distribute the real stories for continued group discussion, encouraging students to use the additional discussion questions for further analysis. Help students think about the issues (e.g., privacy, news judgment, accuracy) that are relevant to each case.



BY BK FOR THE AKRON BEACON JOURNAL
CREATORS SYNDICATE

TIME REQUIRED:

Approximately 20 minutes for each case (10 minutes for small groups of students to discuss each case; 10 minutes for the class as a whole to discuss each case, after a small group reports its conclusions).

PROCEDURE:

Divide the class into groups of five or six students each. Give each group one of the case studies. Ask students to discuss the case within their groups and choose from among the options presented. *Explain that in some of the cases, there may be no clear right or wrong answer; more than one option often has some merit.* When all groups have discussed their cases, ask each group to report to the class as a whole. Group members should briefly summarize the case they have analyzed, and then describe actions they would have taken, had they been journalists in this situation.

Alternatively, you may give the same case to two or more groups. After each group has analyzed the case, it may be interesting to compare the groups' reactions to it.

Since there are 12 cases, you will have enough material for a few class periods. You may want to review all cases prior to beginning this activity, in order to select those cases that might be of greatest interest to your students.

You also may want to add questions to some of the cases taken from the professional press: What if this had happened in a student publication? Would the outcome have been different?

CASE 1

DID THE STORY GO TOO FAR?

You are the features editor of a newspaper in a mid-size Southern city. Many more Hispanic immigrants live and work in your city today, compared with just a few years ago. You believe a story about the new workers will help your readers understand their new neighbors.

One of your top reporters — Cuban-born, fluent in Spanish — finds an illegal immigrant working long, hard hours in a bodega (store). She tells him she wants to write a story about the fact that he is an undocumented worker; she also will describe his plans to help his family, still back in Mexico. He agrees to let the reporter do the story and says she can use his name in the article.

What do you do with the story the reporter turns in?

- A. Verify that she has told the subjects of her story that their names and photos will appear. Then publish the story as the reporter has written it. It's the truth.
- B. Run the story. But don't name people or places. If you identify the worker, he'll be arrested.
- C. Kill the story. It's wrong to get the worker in trouble. But it's also wrong to raise the issue, if you aren't going to tell the whole truth.

CASE 1

DID THE STORY GO TOO FAR?

THE REAL STORY

It's March 1998. *The News & Observer* in Raleigh, N.C., publishes the story, listing names and place of employment, and using photos. Shortly afterward, based on information in the story, agents of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service arrest and begin deportation proceedings for Juan Granados, the young man profiled, and five of his co-workers.

Readers of the newspaper, especially Hispanic readers, are incensed, charging the newspaper with working on behalf of federal agents. The reporter receives death threats.

The editors stand by the reporter's work, but acknowledge they need to strengthen the newspaper's policy for discussing sensitive stories and their possible effects, both on the subjects profiled and in the community. To help with now-fractured community relations, *The News & Observer* donates \$5,000 to a fund to help the six immigrants facing deportation. The editors say they will do a better job of checking such sensitive stories, and all the details they reveal, with staffers before publishing.

FOR DISCUSSION:

© Is it a newspaper's job to expose lawbreakers? To protect them? Neither? Both? What kind of crimes does this apply to? If a newspaper's readers cheat on their taxes, is it the newspaper's responsibility to expose this?

© When is it appropriate to reveal a person's name and place of employment in a story?

© What would you say to someone who contends that the entire story should have been scrapped — that none of it should have been published?

CASE 2

WILL FAIR BUT SENSITIVE STORIES BE ALLOWED TO AIR ON STUDENT TV?

You are student editors of a cable television show on contemporary issues. You've produced a well-researched and thoughtful panel discussion about same-sex marriage. But the school superintendent has refused to allow your show to air. He says the topic is inappropriate for the school system's cable offerings.

What will be your response to the superintendent's decision?

A. Fight it. Go to your principal and ask him to back you and your student staff.

B. Forget it. Even though the story might interest many students, you won't win in a showdown with the school system's top brass.

C. Air it. Give the show to another cable system, the local stations or even the networks. Ask them to air it and support your work.

CASE 2

WILL FAIR BUT SENSITIVE STORIES BE ALLOWED TO AIR ON STUDENT TV?

THE REAL STORY

It's October 1996. High school students in Montgomery County (Md.) Public Schools complete a show for the school system's cable station titled "Shades of Grey," dealing with contemporary issues, including same-sex marriage. When the superintendent halts the broadcast, the students go to their principal, Phillip F. Gainous, for help. Gainous publicly backs the students because the show represents responsible and balanced reporting.

With the principal's help, the students appeal the superintendent's decision. Seven months later, the show is allowed to air. But the superintendent's office follows up with more restrictive rules for student media. Ultimately, after more than three years of negotiations, modified guidelines are adopted that satisfy administrators, teachers and students. For his support of the students, Principal Gainous receives one of the Newseum's first "Courage in Student Journalism" awards.

FOR DISCUSSION:

© Do school leaders have the right to censor school media? Is it right for people who often are the subject of media coverage to have control over the media that cover them?

© What might the students reasonably have done if the principal had not backed them up and the local media failed to pick up the story?

© Are there steps a school publication might take to help allow that balanced reporting, even if on a sensitive subject, has a chance to be printed or aired?

CASE 3

SHOULD YOU PUBLISH THIS PHOTO?

A young girl has been abducted in your town. The local airwaves are full of details about the abduction. A photo-journalist who works at your newspaper has just come into the office with a powerful image: the child's father embracing his minister, with church members in the background preparing handbills on which the missing girl's picture is reproduced.

As a newspaper editor, you can spot a compelling image. The father's face clearly reflects his anguish. The picture evokes genuine empathy for the family's plight. You select that image for the top of the next day's front page. But later in the day — one hour before deadline — reporters learn the young girl has been found. She is wearing different clothes from those she was wearing when she was abducted, suggesting the possibility that she has been sexually assaulted. Your newspaper has a policy of not identifying victims of sexual assault. If you run the photo of her father, her identity will be all over town.

Should you use the photo?

A. Yes, use the photo. It's a great shot and, what's more, the girl's name already has been mentioned on local TV and radio stations.

B. Yes, use the photo but don't name any names.

C. Scrap your front-page layout. The young girl's privacy, as a potential victim of sexual assault, is your paramount concern.

CASE 3

SHOULD YOU PUBLISH THIS PHOTO?

THE REAL STORY

It's April 1998. Jennie Buckner, editor of *The Charlotte (N.C.) Observer*, explains her newspaper's decision not to run the photo: "At some point in the rush, we asked ourselves this: Her name and face have been on TV all day. Everyone at her church and in her neighborhood knows who she is. There are handbills with her photo all over town. Why does it matter if we name her or show her father's face?"

"We had a great photo. Still, (we) knew that lots of people would pick up the (next day's) paper not knowing the girl's name, not knowing what this 12-year-old victim looked like.

"There was no longer any reason to enlist readers to help find her. Our new mission was twofold: to alert the public about the crime and culprit on the loose, and to keep the child from suffering more than she already had."

FOR DISCUSSION:

- © When might it be appropriate for a newspaper to run a private or possibly intrusive photo?
- © Would running the girl's name and picture help catch the molester?

CASE 4

DETACHMENT OR INVOLVEMENT?

You are a reporter for a large urban daily. The paper plans a major series on poverty. Your editor assigns you to do an in-depth piece on the effects of poverty on children, with special emphasis on what happens when drug addiction becomes part of the story.

You have identified several families willing to be subjects for the story. Three families agree to be photographed — and identified — and you spend four months with them, visiting their homes every day and observing what goes on. You tell them your job is to be an observer — a “fly on the wall” — so you can gather information for this important series.

In one home, you watch as a mother allows her 3-year-old daughter to go hungry for 24 hours. You see this same child living in a filthy room, stepping on broken glass and sleeping on a urine-soaked mattress. You know the mother is HIV-positive and you watch as she brushes her daughter's teeth with the same toothbrush she uses. You see the mother hit the child with full force. You see the little girl about to bite on an electrical chord. Her plight haunts you.

What do you do to satisfy both your conscience and your assignment as a reporter?

A. Report the mother to the authorities so the girl will be removed from this terrible environment and placed in a foster home. Then write the story.

B. Write the story first, detailing your observations. After the story has been published, notify the authorities, giving the mother's address.

C. Write the story, but don't identify the mother or child to police or social service authorities. Remember, you are a reporter. You've put the information in the newspaper; it's not your job to act as a police officer.

CASE 4

DETACHMENT OR INVOLVEMENT?

THE REAL STORY

In the summer of 1997, the *Los Angeles Times* sends reporter Sonia Nazario and photographer Clarence Williams to chronicle the life of children living in poverty with drug-addicted parents. Nazario and Williams spend many hours at the homes of families and watch as addicted parents neglect their children. From the beginning, the journalists describe their jobs as observers — merely “flies on the wall.” They explain that they are not baby sitters and that they will not give the families any money.

After the story is published, hundreds of readers call to complain that the reporters did nothing to help the suffering children. Many feel the reporters immediately should have reported what they saw to authorities. The parents, whose names are used in the story, are later arrested and the children go to foster homes. The powerful series has a huge impact on readers, who call police to report other child abuse cases in their communities.

FOR DISCUSSION:

- © Are reporters merely observers? Or is there a time when reporters should go for help?
- © How would you have handled the story differently, if at all?
- © Would you have stopped the baby from biting on an electrical chord, as Clarence Williams did? Would you have stopped the parents from screaming at their children, as Clarence did not?

CASE 5

MAKING AN EDITORIAL DECISION

You are editor-in-chief of your school newspaper, *The Bulldog Express*. For the *Bulldog's* next issue, you've edited and approved an article, written from public records, about a shoplifting incident that occurred on a school field trip. The story does not mention the shoplifter's name.

The journalism adviser has cleared the piece for publication and, as is the policy, has sent the entire issue of the newspaper to the principal for final review. The principal rejects the story, saying it puts the school in a negative light.

You believe the story should be published. It's the truth. Rumors are rampant about the incident and arrest of the thief, and the school newspaper story will help student readers get the facts.

What approach will you take with your school's newspaper?

A. Pull the story. Write a new story on a non-controversial topic. Substitute it for the piece on the shoplifter. You don't want to get the newspaper's adviser in trouble.

B. Pull the story, but sue the principal and school administration for violating your First Amendment rights. Point out that your sources for the story are a matter of public record, and you stand by the facts as presented.

C. Run the story. Add a few paragraphs, explaining how rare such incidents are on school trips. Hope this context addresses the principal's concerns.

CASE 5

MAKING AN EDITORIAL DECISION

THE REAL STORY

It's 1997. Dan Vagasky, a middle school student in Michigan and editor of his school newspaper, tries to publish a story about a shoplifting incident that occurred during a school field trip. The story includes arrest record information from the sheriff's department, but does not mention the student shoplifter's name. Although school officials note the story is accurate, they do not permit its publication because "it reflect(s) poorly on the school district."

Vagasky and his adviser protest, but with no results. Vagasky files suit. The newspaper adviser is stripped of her responsibilities and forced to take a job elsewhere. The school newspaper is shut down.

In 1998 Vagasky's suit is settled out of court when the school board agrees that no story can be rejected solely because it shows the school district in a negative light. The newspaper is reinstated, but now is a weak version of its former self.

For his efforts, Dan Vagasky is awarded one of the Newseum's first "Courage in Student Journalism" awards.

FOR DISCUSSION:

© Under what conditions might authorities cut an article from a school newspaper? What about an "underground" (or non-school-affiliated) newspaper?

(The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that school officials may restrict the publication of material in a school-sponsored publication if, in their opinion, the information is disruptive to the school's educational environment. The same restrictions do not apply to student newspapers or publications that are not part of the school's curriculum or extra-curricular programs. The 1988 ruling, *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier*, applies to school publications at the high school level and below, although some student press experts worry that the Supreme Court may expand the principles in *Hazelwood* to college publications.)

© Why is it important for a school newspaper to include information about events taking place in a school's neighborhood? Or on a school field trip?

CASE 6

IS THIS GAME FAIR?

As editor of a newspaper in a Southwestern city — where sports rivalries between area college teams are big news — you decide to check out the university's football program. You've heard that its rival is undergoing investigation for irregularities in its recruiting practices, and you want to find out if the same things are going on at the university.

You assign two reporters to start digging, and they find plenty of evidence. Hotel rooms purportedly rented for football recruits in actuality were occupied by women. Expense vouchers for the bills were approved by the university's football coach. You run one story and assign the reporters to do an intensive investigation for follow-up articles.

As word gets out that you are investigating, you become the target of a hate campaign, spearheaded by university alumni and leading members of the business community. These people claim that publishing the series will destroy the athletic director and his family and will harm the university's sports program, denying the university a major source of income. But you have the facts in hand for a blockbuster story.

What should you do about it?

- A. Give the athletic director a chance to respond to the charges. Then publish.
- B. Postpone publication indefinitely. No job is worth getting hurt over.
- C. Continue to investigate the story, but hold off publishing it until after the football season. That way no one can say you destroyed the team's spirit and will to win.

CASE 6

IS THIS GAME FAIR?

THE REAL STORY

It's January 1980. The editor of *The Arizona Daily Star* uncovers and runs a story of potential scandal involving the athletic department and football recruits at the University of Arizona. As the investigation proceeds and evidence of graft and corruption are uncovered, the business community objects and the paper is threatened with advertising boycotts. At one point, the editor himself is warned that he and his family will be run out of town.

The editor decides to postpone publishing the story until after the football season so he will not be accused of destroying team morale. Before publication, he arranges a meeting to provide an opportunity for the coach to respond to the charges. When the coach fails to show up for the meeting, the newspaper runs the story in full, describing an array of irregularities and fraudulent practices by the coach and the athletic department.

Ultimately the coach is charged with several felonies. He is forced to resign. The athletic director also leaves. The university is put on probation by the NCAA.

The Arizona Daily Star wins a 1981 Pulitzer Prize for this investigative series.

FOR DISCUSSION:

© How did issues of privacy and fairness enter into the editor's decision?

© What do you think the editor would have done if he had learned that a competing newspaper also was on to the story? What would you have done?

© If these events had happened in the late 1990s, how might press coverage have differed?

NOTE: In March 1999, the *Pioneer Press*, in St. Paul, Minn., ran a story about academic fraud within the University of Minnesota's basketball program. A woman had alleged, and the paper's investigative reporters confirmed, that during a five-year period she had written papers and taken tests for the university's basketball players. The newspaper printed the story when it was ready, just one day before Minnesota was to play in the first round of the NCAA basketball tournament. The university suspended the players involved, and Minnesota lost the game. Many readers, including Minnesota's Governor Jesse Ventura, were angered that the newspaper ran the story right before the big game and accused the paper of doing so deliberately, as purely sensational journalism.

The *Pioneer Press'* major competitor, the *Star Tribune* in Minneapolis, had been scooped, but immediately began its own coverage of the scandal. No one disputed the facts of the story, and most journalists say the papers were right to go with the story as soon as they had it. What do you think?

CASE 7

RUSH TO JUDGMENT

You work at a major metropolitan newspaper. A source has called with a tip: A Secret Service agent has seen President Clinton "in a compromising situation" with Monica Lewinsky, a young White House intern. This is a source who is usually reliable — and the story about the president's romantic liaisons is white hot. The independent counsel investigating Clinton is alleging that he lied about the relationship with Lewinsky, so this is a prized piece of information. If you don't rush to get this story out, other news media will beat you to it.

What do you do?

- A. Find another source who will corroborate the story. As soon as you've got a second source, publish the story.
- B. Go with it. Count on your usually reliable source. Put the story in the morning newspaper and on your Web site.
- C. Sit on the story. The president's personal life is his own business. It doesn't matter if he lied about his affair, even if he did it in legal documents defending himself from a sexual harassment claim.

CASE 7

RUSH TO JUDGMENT

THE REAL STORY

The Dallas Morning News learns from a usually reliable source that a Secret Service agent had witnessed President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky in "a compromising situation." In January 1998, reacting to competitive pressures in the midst of breaking news about whether the president lied in court documents about his personal life, the newspaper publishes the report in an early morning edition and on its Web site. But shortly afterward, the source calls back to say his information is wrong. The newspaper stops the presses and issues a retraction. But the story already has gone out on the Web and over The Associated Press wires. CNN, ABC News and many media outlets find themselves in the same position as *The Dallas Morning News*, forced to issue almost immediate retractions.

This episode, and many similar ones surrounding the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, caused a great deal of hand-wringing among members of the media. Competitive pressures, they say, are causing print media to loosen their all-important standards. The Internet and the speed with which news travels put added pressure on newspapers to "go live" on the Web. Media are relying too heavily on anonymous sources and are failing to double-check news before releasing it.

FOR DISCUSSION:

- © What has been the impact of the Internet on breaking news stories?
- © What are some steps a news organization might take to ensure that inaccurate information is not reported?
- © Should a news organization have special policies or ways of handling information that comes from anonymous sources?
- © Does the error really matter if the president later admits he did have an "inappropriate relationship" with the intern?

CASE 8

LOCKER ROOM LUCK

You are a seasoned sportswriter for a major news service. You are covering a baseball player's push to break a record for the most home runs hit in a single season. While in the locker room waiting for a post-game interview with the player, you notice his locker is open. On the shelf you see a bottle of tablets — nutritional supplements used by athletes to strengthen their muscles. The supplements are banned in some sports, but they are legal in baseball.

What do you do with this information?

A. Nothing. You saw the supplements, but you shouldn't have. A player's locker is his private property.

B. Check it out. If the supplements are controversial, write the story. He had them in his locker.

C. Ask the player about the supplements. Tell him your next story may mention that he uses them, and see what he says. If he objects, drop the story.

CASE 8

LOCKER ROOM LUCK

THE REAL STORY

It's August 1998 — a hot time for baseball. St. Louis Cardinals player Mark McGwire is in a race to break baseball's single-season home run record.

A sports reporter for The Associated Press notices that McGwire has a bottle of androstenedione in his locker. The nutritional supplements (sometimes referred to by the shortened name "Andro") are sold over the counter and are widely available as a testosterone-producing substance. They are banned in some sports, but not in baseball.

When the reporter writes his story, he describes the contents of McGwire's locker, mentioning the presence of androstenedione.

Many in professional baseball, and some other sportswriters, accuse the AP reporter of "snooping," even though McGwire eventually acknowledges having used the tablets for about a year. The AP reporter stands by his actions, explaining that it is news when a baseball player is using a substance that, although legal in his sport, is banned elsewhere.

The reporter says an Olympic shot-putter was banned for life from that sport for using "Andro," and says the difference between the two sports itself is newsworthy.

FOR DISCUSSION:

© Should interviews held in locker rooms be handled any differently from interviews held elsewhere? Why or why not?

© Should the reporter have written about the "Andro" in Mark McGwire's locker without first confirming that McGwire was using it?

CASE 9

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

You are a senior reporter for one of the country's largest daily newspapers. Your assignment is to chronicle the work of the city's former mayor, who is back in town on leave from his current post as a U.S. ambassador. Your editor believes that a feature about the well-liked politician in a position of national importance will interest readers.

You are aware that in the past the former mayor often stopped in at a local bar for a few beers after work with reporters, City Hall pals and other friends. As a matter of fact, you yourself have been present on more than one of these occasions. Your editor tells you he once saw him weaving down the street, apparently drunk. You investigate the former mayor's drinking.

How do you handle this information?

- A. Follow him around and keep a record of his drinking habits. Then write a story describing his drinking and the potential damage it could cause in his professional life.
- B. Write the article recording events in his professional life — as assigned — and include your observations of his drinking somewhere in the story.
- C. Make no mention in your story of the politician's after-work drinking because it's his personal business. It's not a crime. You've found no evidence that alcohol has affected his professional activities.

CASE 9

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

THE REAL STORY

It's October 1997. *The Boston Globe* publishes a 4,700-word story detailing the work history of Raymond Flynn, who had served three terms as Boston's mayor prior to his appointment as U.S. ambassador to the Vatican. During his tenure as mayor, Flynn was known to visit bars and drink with local residents, including several *Globe* reporters and editors. On one occasion, a *Globe* senior editor had seen Flynn staggering around the streets of downtown Boston, apparently drunk.

The *Globe's* editor sends reporters to Rome to follow Flynn around and observe the former mayor's daily activities. The final story focuses on Flynn's record as ambassador, citing both his accomplishments as well as his failures. Although Flynn's drinking is not highlighted, the article does mention incidents of his drunkenness.

The story angers many readers, who complain the *Globe* has crossed the line in reporting details of the former mayor's life outside the office. Flynn denies he has a drinking problem and describes himself as an average guy who — like many Bostonians — enjoys having a few beers after work. He also charges the newspaper with discriminating against him as an Irish Catholic — although the editor as well as many of the newspaper's staff also are Irish Catholic. The *Globe's* editor, Matthew Storin, justifies his newspaper's actions by saying, "We have a responsibility to inform our readers about both his (Flynn's) public behavior and his performance record in a public post."

In fall 1998, some time after the stories appeared, Flynn is a candidate in a primary election, but he loses in his bid to become his party's nominee for election to the U.S. House of Representatives.

FOR DISCUSSION:

- © When is it appropriate to reveal what a politician does outside of work hours? Can heavy drinking after work affect you in any way the next day? Do politicians and public figures even have "work hours?"
- © When should a journalist follow a public figure in order to investigate his or her personal life?
- © What would you say to someone who says the story went too far in reporting about the former mayor's drinking habits?

CASE 10

IF IT BLEEDS, IT LEADS

You are the new executive producer of a nightly TV news program. You recognize that high ratings bring advertisers. But you are not satisfied with the news program. You believe it tends toward the sensational, highlighting crime stories and trivia rather than more important issues. As if to confirm your judgment, several viewers call the station to complain about crime and violence on the news. Some scenes, they say, are unnecessarily raw. One viewer says running six crime stories in a row is "tabloid journalism." You know from experience that viewers will tune to stories about murder, scandals and gruesome accidents. You also know your program won't stay on the air if it reports only good news.

What can you do to make the nightly news relevant, informative and interesting to viewers?

- A. Grab the audience, but also include news about major issues. Don't worry, ratings will come around.
- B. Limit the number of crime stories. Emphasize what you know to be true — that crimes are occurring less frequently in your area.
- C. Play up crime news, particularly scoops, because, quite frankly, people want to see them. No viewers, no program. No program, no news at all.

CASE 10

IF IT BLEEDS, IT LEADS

THE REAL STORY

It's spring 1997. Channel 2, WESH-TV, an NBC-affiliate station in Orlando, Fla., hires a new general manager with a reputation for producing in-depth news, in contrast to the usual mayhem seen on local television news programs. The new manager reorganizes the staff, assigning "beats" such as education, local government and the environment. At the same time, he reduces the number of crime stories and "puff" pieces.

Unfortunately, while staff members at the station try to implement the new policy, other stations are sending more reporters and photographers out to cover sensational stories, scooping Channel 2. With fewer stories about crime and more about issues, Channel 2's ratings drop to the bottom of the list for stations in the Orlando area.

The new general manager, with support from top management, says these changes are important and require patience. He vows to teach the staff how to find the right balance between issue-oriented news and stories calculated to bring high ratings. But it takes a while to make a difference. "You can't affect viewing behavior and patterns overnight," he says.

It's now spring 1999, nearly two years after the new manager began his push for in-depth reporting. WESH-TV is rated No. 1 in the 11 p.m. time slot and is close to capturing the top position in the important "sunrise" slot (5 - 7 a.m.). The station's reporters have covered major education initiatives in Florida, including the governor's plan to rate schools and teachers and allow parents to use vouchers to send their children to schools they choose. Channel 2 has aired a story about Orlando's Lake Apopka and a failed plan to decrease pollution there and has done a one-hour prime-time news story on heroin traffic in the area. The general manager says his reporters are aggressive in covering breaking news but still try to do enterprise reporting on issues that are important to the local community. "Of course we're looking for ratings," he says, "but we've taken some of the silliness out of the local news."

FOR DISCUSSION:

© Is the function of a news program to entertain, inform, editorialize or something else? How did you arrive at your answer?

© If you were responsible for a nightly news program, what would be your criteria for selecting news stories?

© What do you think might have happened if WESH-TV's top management did not give the new general manager enough time to produce results?

CASE 11

SHOULD AN EDITOR PROTECT YOUNG READERS?

You are the editor for a large-circulation daily newspaper. A school shooting takes place on the other side of the country. This is the third such shooting this year; in this one, a 15-year-old boy opened fire into a school cafeteria, killing two students and wounding 22 others.

You know the story will be all over the TV networks for days. Yet it is not a local story. You know some parents believe children in your city will be frightened if they see this story splashed on your front page.

Do you protect young readers in your city?

A. You can't. This is a real story, with real implications about gun violence among children. It's up to the parents to protect their kids. Run the story as front-page news.

B. You can. Cover the story the way you normally would, but not on Page One. Instead, put a note to readers there, explaining that for the sake of the children in your city, you are running the story on pages 2 and 3 instead.

C. Of course you can. Do not use the story in the front section at all. Run it as a filler back by the classified ads — or as a feature story in the style section.

CASE 11

SHOULD AN EDITOR PROTECT YOUNG READERS?

THE REAL STORY

In *The New York Times*, May 23, 1998, Nigel Wade, editor of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, explains why he decided not to use as front-page news the story of a school shooting in Springfield, Ore.:

"I took the view that we had to balance our responsibility to report the news against our responsibility to society as a whole. If such a tragedy happened in Chicago — in one of our schools, involving our children — our readers would want to read about it on Page One. But I did not think it safe to go on treating every new schoolyard incident the same way."

The paper ran the story on pages 2 and 3, and included a message to readers on the front, explaining its position that "more prominent coverage might harm or frighten vulnerable children." Reader responses were overwhelmingly positive. Parents, teachers and even nonreaders who had heard on the radio about the newspaper's decision called to say they were "proud, thankful and relieved that a major newspaper had treated the latest tragedy this way."

Wade continues: "There will be disasters in the future that we will cover on Page One. We would go out of business if we didn't. But with all stories, particularly when children's safety may be at risk, the *Sun-Times* will continue to insist that the telling and the presentation be accurate, fair — and necessary."

And the following year, when yet another school shooting takes place near Denver, Wade covers the story in the same fashion. Here's the editor's note he prints on April 21, 1999:

"The *Sun-Times* has decided again not to give front-page prominence to a school shooting — this time in Littleton, Colo., — because we are concerned that such treatment could harm or frighten vulnerable children. Full coverage appears inside the paper.

"We see a danger that publicity surrounding such attacks could be contributing to the phenomenon.

"Readers — particularly parents — have told us clearly that they support our policy of keeping such reports off Page One. In doing so we are trying to balance our duty to report the news with our duty to society as a whole."

FOR DISCUSSION:

© Do you agree with Wade when he says that "publicity surrounding such attacks could be contributing to the phenomenon"?

© The *Chicago Sun-Times* was the only major newspaper to treat the school shootings in this fashion. Why do you think that was so?

© Even though the April 21 issue of the *Sun-Times* did not include coverage of the Colorado school shootings on Page One, it did include a headline and photo about atrocities in Kosovo. How do you think the editor would justify covering violence in the NATO war against the Serbs on the front page, but not violence in a Denver school?

CASE 12

TO WHAT LENGTHS SHOULD YOU GO TO GET A STORY?

You are a correspondent for a major television network. Your producers have done a great deal of research about a national grocery chain; they allege that some of its grocery stores are asking employees to participate in unsanitary food-handling practices.

This is an important story. Consumers may get sick if they eat tainted food, you argue, and they have a right to know that a food store is not handling its food in a safe manner. You want to make sure this story airs on national television; you believe that to get good footage you have to go into the store with cameras and film the store's workers actually engaging in unsafe practices. You need proof.

As the television correspondent, how will you get your story?

A. Call the store manager and request an on-site interview, with cameras. Explain that you have some information that consumers will want to know about and give the store a chance to show its side of the story.

B. Just appear at the store one day, without advance notice to the manager. That way you won't tip off the staff that you're on to a story.

C. Pretend to be looking for a job in the store; complete an employment application and actually get hired. Then, while you're at work, use hidden cameras to document the unsafe practices you see.

CASE 12

TO WHAT LENGTHS SHOULD YOU GO TO GET A STORY?

THE REAL STORY

It's 1992. ABC News uses "undercover" workers to expose unsafe food-handling practices by the Food Lion supermarket chain. The story attracts national attention when it airs on "PrimeTime Live," a televised news-magazine show.

The supermarket chain sues ABC News, but not for libel. (To sue for libel, Food Lion would have to claim that the story is false and that ABC News acted with "actual malice" in deliberately reporting it.) Instead Food Lion accuses ABC News of civil fraud, trespass and breach of loyalty.

Though the video captures unsanitary food-handling practices and the accusations against the supermarket appear to be true, a jury finds ABC News guilty as charged and awards more than \$5.5 million in punitive damages to the supermarket company. The jurors find that ABC's employees have committed fraud because they lied on their employment applications to Food Lion; jurors also find that ABC News employees are guilty of trespassing on Food Lion's property and of other deceptive practices. They add \$1,402 in compensatory damages to Food Lion, to cover the wages the supermarket chain paid to the two ABC employees it hired.

But the case does not end there. ABC News asks the court to reduce the punitive damages, and the U.S. District Court judge agrees; he cuts the award dramatically — to \$315,000. In October 1997, Food Lion accepts the reduced award, but ABC News continues to press for dropping it entirely.

And, in a related development, Food Lion is sued by its shareholders, who blame company executives for \$1 billion in stock losses that resulted when the ABC story was aired. Food Lion in turn sues the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, charging that union members deliberately engaged in health violations in retaliation for a long-standing labor-management dispute. At the time this curriculum package was being prepared for publication, those subsequent lawsuits were still outstanding.

FOR DISCUSSION:

- © Should reporters ever use hidden cameras in order to get a story? When might such journalistic practices be justified and when not?
- © Should reporters ever deliberately fail to identify themselves as reporters in order to get a story?
- © Why do you think ABC News wants the court to drop the entire punitive award — now at \$315,000? Should news organizations worry about Food Lion's tactics — suing not because the story was false but because of things the reporters did to get the story?

Please look at page 51, on the right, for a Feb. 17, 1999, column reprinted from USA TODAY. It illuminates yet another aspect to the thorny question of hidden cameras. In the column, Philip Meyer poses this question: Does the very fact of using hidden cameras create its own form of bias? If a reporter is looking for a problem and is using hidden cameras to document it, will his or her bias get in the way of fair and accurate reporting?

Meyer wrote his column after reading a 1998 article about the Food Lion case in the IRE Journal (the magazine for investigative reporters and editors). Later, in August 1999, editors of the IRE Journal apologized to ABC and the producers of "Prime Time Live." The editors note that the earlier IRE Journal article criticizing ABC's tactics itself had serious flaws. For one, the editors say, the author failed to "uphold journalistic standards" by not contacting ABC for comment before the article was published. In addition, the tone and the approach of the article suggest bias. The debate about hidden cameras continues. What do you think?

Food Lion case shows that cameras, indeed, can lie

By Philip Meyer

When ABC sent undercover reporters to infiltrate Food Lion stores in the Carolinas in 1992, it set off a rousing debate over the ethics of investigative journalism. Now it looks like the debate missed the main point.

With lipstick-size video cameras concealed in their hair and using faked resumes to get Food Lion jobs, the investigators captured sounds and images of what appeared to be stomach-turning food-handling practices by the authentic employees.

For journalism professors, the case was a windfall. I have shown that *Prime Time Live* segment to every media ethics class that I have taught since 1993. The debate — in my class, in textbooks and in other commentaries on media morality since then — was over the appropriateness of undercover reporting. Is it moral to conceal one's identity in order to nail the bad guy?

The discussion typically takes the form of a cost-benefit analysis, what philosophers call "utilitarianism." Did the good in exposing the risk to public health outweigh the harm to those who were unknowingly providing the evidence?

Viewed that way, it's pretty easy to justify intrusive reporting methods. Even the objection that the information could have been collected in other ways, such as through the testimony of former employees, is arguable. The hidden cameras produce entertainment value, and TV needs to be entertaining to get our attention. While witnesses might lie, the camera surely cannot.

Well, maybe it can. An article in the current issue of *The IRE Journal*, published by the Missouri-based organization of elite investigative reporters and editors, invites us to consider the possibility.

Written by Sandra Davidson of the University of Missouri School of Journalism, the article points to a different ethical issue: lying through selective editing. After viewing some of the footage ABC didn't use — among the 45 hours' worth obtained by Food Lion through discovery procedures —

Davidson concluded that these images provide some support for the grocery chain's accusations of wrongdoing by ABC. And they do so, she says, "with a power that is difficult for the printed word to match."

ABC News spokeswoman Eileen Murphy has promised a response to Davidson and her cited Food Lion materials. I have seen Food Lion's selection of footage, and its effect is indeed powerful.

For example, the original broadcast showed a worker's feet sliding on the meat department's floor while a voice-over blamed a greasy surface. A scene from the outtake offers an alternate explanation: The employee was washing equipment, and the source of the slipperiness was spilled soapy water.

A conversation that in the broadcast seemed to record a Food Lion employee complaining about having to prepare outdated chicken for sale reveals something else when editing cuts are restored. She had asked her supervisor for permission to discard the spoiled chicken. "He told me to dump it, go back and get fresh chicken . . ." and, she adds, she learned that no prior approval for getting rid of spoiled food was needed.

Not all of the broadcast's accusations were refuted in this way, but the ability of picture selection to support a preconception was clearly demonstrated — whether the selection is ABC's in the original broadcast or Food Lion's in its editing of outtakes.

The main problem with undercover investigations is not the invasion of privacy or faking credentials. The real problem is that undercover observers find it very difficult, if not impossible, to go to work with open minds. Their projects involve so much of their company's money, not to mention their own sweat, that almost anything would be better than returning empty-handed.

Such a strong bias could find incriminating evidence anywhere, even in newsrooms. Conversations there tend to be energetic and irreverent. I know that any 45 hours of secret videotaping could provide enough images and sound bites for splicing to ruin the reputation of the most

respected among us. Think about your own workplace, and you will get the idea.

Carl Sagan, in his plea for scientific thinking, *The Demon-Haunted World*, argued that all undercover observation has a built-in bias for perceiving evil, especially if the observers are paid. The witch hysteria in medieval Europe was one of his examples.

But he also cited a case of paid undercover postal inspectors in Cleveland who fabricated criminal evidence against 32 innocent colleagues. That was in 1994.

Several things could have been done to make the Food Lion investigation more scientific. One would have been to send crews to the stores of different companies without telling them which one was suspected of unsanitary practices. That would at least have indicated whether Food Lion was abnormal by industry standards.

Another would have been to train the reporters to be passive and neutral observers, as eager to record the good as the bad. In the ABC outtakes, you can hear someone vocalizing disappointment with soft expletives when an anticipated wrongdoing or damaging statement fails to materialize. At another point, someone murmurs, "... get these guys."

Equating journalism with science might sound pretentious, but journalism should not be shy about adopting the well-tested rules of scientific method that are designed to counter our human tendencies to fool ourselves with prejudice and wishful thinking. There is a small but growing band of reporters using some of the tools of science, including statistical sampling and analysis, who buy into that model.

But they are running against the tide of the moment, trying to push journalism toward science while the rest of the trade is pushing it toward art and entertainment. Rather than argue about hidden cameras, let's debate that one.

Philip Meyer holds the Knights Chair in Journalism at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He is also a consultant for USA TODAY and a member of the newspaper's board of contributors.

Part Four

WHEN TRAGEDY HITS — A TRUE STORY

This is a role-playing exercise for the whole class. Please be sure to review the material in this activity before introducing it to your students. Its subject — school shootings — is sensitive; you may decide it is too difficult for some students, especially younger ones.

In April 1999, while this curriculum was being prepared, Americans witnessed a violent school rampage in Littleton, Colo., yet another in a string of such deadly events.

We have chosen a 1998 case — school shootings in Jonesboro, Ark. — because we have the perspective of time in analyzing the media's performance during and after that event. We hope this role-playing activity will help students understand the important role that media play in times of tragedy. We also offer, on the Newseum's Web site (www.newseum.org), some additional discussion questions about the Littleton shootings, as follow-up to this exercise.

This activity is based on material offered in "Jonesboro: Were the Media Fair?" an examination of media coverage and its impact published by The Freedom Forum. We have provided a copy of "Were the Media Fair?" as an adjunct to this curriculum package; we encourage you to read it through before introducing the activity. You also are invited to add your own questions for student discussion and role-playing to those provided on the following pages.

The case study offered here is based on actual events in Jonesboro, Ark., on March 24, 1998, and in the weeks that followed. Two middle school students, ages 11 and 13, opened fire on their classmates, killing four female students and one teacher, who died while trying to protect her charges.

HOW TO USE THE ROLE-PLAYING EXERCISE

The activity is designed as an exercise for the class as a whole. It encourages students to explore the complex interactions among media, the public, law enforcement officials and others when an important news story breaks. Its aim: To help students understand how even seemingly simple decisions about coverage take on major significance as a story unfolds. The activity will work best when your students have completed the preceding discussions of media ethics and have spent some time, in small groups, analyzing the shorter cases presented earlier in this curriculum package.

STUDENTS WILL PLAY THE FOLLOWING ROLES:

A reporter for the local newspaper
A prominent news anchor from a Canadian television station
The school principal
A parent
A law enforcement official
A member of the general public

When you introduce the activity to the class, remind students that an overriding concern in a situation like the school shootings in Jonesboro is hunger for information. News organizations want to be first with information and analysis. Readers and viewers want to know who's involved, who's been hurt — or if a tragedy like this one can happen in their home towns. Law enforcement officials want every scrap of information leading to the arrest of the perpetrators, and they want to maintain calm among the general public. School and other authorities want to know why such a tragedy happened and how to keep it from happening again.

Thus, the pressure is on — for all players. As they go through this exercise, students should be mindful of the way they themselves have behaved in the face of other important, breaking news stories. As they play their roles, students should understand: People *want to know* what happened; they have a *right to know* — and often have an overriding *need to know*.

OBJECTIVES:

At the conclusion of this activity, students will be able to:

- © Discuss the natural tensions that exist among media outlets competing as they cover a breaking news story of major importance, government officials trying to ensure that justice is served and a public hungry for information.
- © Analyze the difficulties inherent in news coverage of a violent event and its aftermath; explore the effects of news coverage on the families of those involved, on the suspects and on local citizens.
- © Evaluate the performance of various media outlets in covering a tragic event, with a view toward improved understanding of the role and responsibilities of a free and fair press.

TIME REQUIRED:

Two to three class periods

MATERIALS NEEDED /

PREPARATION:

Duplicate the student handouts (*reproducible pages 57-59*). You should make enough copies of the page marked "Setting the scene" to allow each student to read the material and understand the basics of this activity. You will probably want to make a few copies of the reproducible pages containing the role cards, to save for future use.

Cut apart the role cards and place them in a hat or bowl. Divide the class into six small groups and ask one member of each group to draw a role card for the group.

PROCEDURES:

Encourage students, within their small groups, to discuss the roles they are playing. Ask students to think about the following questions as they prepare to play their roles:

- © What are the motivations, needs and interests of the person we are representing and people like that person?
- © What are some ethical issues that might arise for the person we are representing (and others like him or her)? (Privacy, accuracy, fairness, sensationalism, news judgment, etc.)



TORONTO GLOBE AND MAIL

INTRODUCING THE JONESBORO ROLE-PLAYING ACTIVITY:

1. Begin the activity by telling students how people first found out about the school shootings in Jonesboro, Ark.: A call to 911 from the school, at 12:38 p.m., sends city police and members of the sheriff's office rushing to the school. Emergency calls go, at the same time, to Jonesboro's three ambulance services. A reporter for the local newspaper, *The Jonesboro Sun*, happens to be at an auto-parts shop when someone rushes in with news of a commotion — marked by police vehicles and ambulances — near the school. The reporter calls the police department's 911 center and learns the exact location: Westside Middle School. At just about the same time, a reporter for the local television station, in the newsroom, hears a radio dispatcher describing events at the school. Both reporters arrive at the scene within minutes of each other. The TV reporter soon is joined by the station's "live truck."

FOR DISCUSSION:

© What actions and behaviors would you expect of the person you are playing and others like him or her? Talk with others in your group and report to the class.

© Ask students who are playing the representative from the local media: Do you take pictures of the injured students? Of those who might have died? Do you try to get interviews with students who have survived the shooting?

2. Police alert area hospitals, telling doctors and emergency personnel about the shooting. The first reports air on television. The news is on The Associated Press wire and other news outlets are beginning to pick up the story. Reporters are beginning to gather at the hospital where injured students are being treated. And, by talking to students at the school, journalists learn the identities of the two boys believed to have done the shooting.

FOR DISCUSSION:

© Should reporters reveal to the public the names of the juvenile suspects? Are there some crimes that warrant the naming of suspects, and

some that do not? (Many news organizations have policies stating they will not reveal the names of juvenile suspects.) Remember to keep in mind the interests of the people you are representing as you think about this question.

3. It's only two hours after the incident; a spokesperson from the Arkansas state police headquarters has received dozens of phone messages from media organizations, clamoring for information. By mid-afternoon, journalists are arriving from other U.S. cities. By late afternoon and early evening, press people from national news organizations are on the scene. "News-magazine" shows send personnel to cover the story; by 7 p.m., the first international TV crews are in Jonesboro. The police already have held their first press briefing and are about to hold another one. At this time, the police spokesperson confirms the names of the victims.

Twenty-four hours after the incident, the stack of messages from the media has grown thick; the sheriff, so upset by the shootings and the intense pressure from this case, has broken down in tears during a media briefing.

FOR DISCUSSION:

© Members of each group should report to the class, *in the roles they are playing*, about their feelings and thoughts in the face of this media onslaught.

4. School officials plan counseling sessions for the children and their families, to be held the evening of the shooting. But families have to walk through a phalanx of reporters, photographers and TV camera crews. The bright lights and microphones are startling, even frightening, to some of the children.

At the hospital where injuries are being treated, medical personnel create a special media briefing room and begin a regular series of reports to the press. Hospital officials put family members in a separate area, off limits to the press. The hospital's efforts to provide a steady stream of information to the media, as well as the sheriff's department's continual updates, keep misinformation to a minimum.

FOR DISCUSSION:

© What approaches by media personnel to acquire information do you consider fair — or enterprise reporting — and what approaches do you think are out of bounds? For example, what if a reporter is able to get past the hospital's media briefing room and speak directly with a nurse? With a patient?

5. Inaccurate information begins to emerge. For example, one newspaper reports that the teacher who died was pregnant at the time. This was based on an early test, performed in the hospital, that later turned out to have had a false result. But the word leaks out — and is continually picked up by other news organizations. In another example, reports that a second teacher who was wounded "might not live through the night" are heard from as far away as Chicago. That teacher, in fact, is in stable condition.

FOR DISCUSSION:

© What might be the possible impact of incorrect information about the victims' condition? On the other hand, how helpful is this kind of information if it is correct?

6. The mass of journalists creates fear and tension in the town. The mother of one of the young suspects has to face reporters staking out positions and hiding in her yard; she calls police twice in the middle of the night to have the journalists removed from her property. The husband of the teacher who died has television cameras continually focused on his front door. Another victim's family looks up from the breakfast table to find cameras pressed against the kitchen window.

FOR DISCUSSION:

© Is there anything that police and other law-enforcement officials can do to keep too-aggressive journalists from invading people's privacy? Should they? (Please remember the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: "Congress shall make no law ... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press.") Is there anything that media organizations can or should do?

© In your opinion, what motivates "too-aggressive" journalists to employ those tactics?

7. A reporter for the local newspaper writes a long, sensitive account about one of the young girls who died. The story tells what kind of a kid she was — what she liked to do, what she liked to read, how she spent time with her friends. Another writes of the teacher who died, casting her as a hero and showcasing her love for her students. But the young boys who are the suspects are portrayed harshly; one is said to have been a victim of abuse.

FOR DISCUSSION:

© What differences, if any, should there be in news coverage describing victims of serious crimes and news coverage of suspects or perpetrators of those crimes?

8. In an effort to give meaning to the actions of the two young suspects, several media organizations offer descriptions of the region's "gun culture," explaining that hunting is a common activity, even with young children and their families, in many areas of the South. Pundits describe one of the shooting suspects as having learned about guns "practically before he learned to walk." Other media outlets offer other cultural influences, including the glamorization of violence on television and the movies, as possible contributors to the boys' actions. Much of this analysis causes resentment among Jonesboro's citizens.

FOR DISCUSSION:

© Assume you have in your possession a photograph of one of the suspects, as a six-year-old, dressed in hunting garb and toting a gun. Do you publish it? What if the picture was recent — had been taken the week before the crime? Would you publish it then?

9. News coverage continues for several days after the incident. Some stories report developments in the police investigation; others offer encouraging news about the wounded who are recovering. One story describes the successes of the past few days — describing the effectiveness of services provided by the area's three ambulance companies, and how well the hospital and medical staff performed under extreme duress.

Now it's time for the funerals. Coverage is extensive and includes long segments of the clergymen's remarks; newspapers run sensitive photos of the grieving parents and family members and long, detailed obituaries.

FOR DISCUSSION:

© When is it time to take this tragedy off Page One? What have been the effects of this intense media coverage?

© Is it newsworthy to cover the funerals in cases like this? Why or why not?

FOR CONTINUED DISCUSSION:

"Jonesboro: Were the Media Fair?" gives a thorough accounting of the tragedy at Westside Middle School and a detailed analysis of media performance throughout. Briefly, the report gives high marks to the media for helping the community cope with this senseless tragedy, and especially singles out the local newspaper, *The Jonesboro Sun*, for providing balanced, fair and sensitive coverage.

The book gives a good deal of credit to the newspaper's editor and publisher, John W. Troutt Jr. At the very beginning of the story, he made a crucial policy decision. "This is a shooting story and so it has a cops-and-shooters aspect to it. But

the victims are not just the ... people who were shot. Everybody ... is in pain.... The victims are the entire community ... and we are going to focus our coverage on the victims. We are going to cover the two shooters, too, and thoroughly ... but we are going to maximize our coverage of the victims, because that's everybody in Jonesboro."

© What were the effects of Troutt's policy and viewpoint on the newspaper's coverage?

© Do you think lessons learned about news coverage in the Jonesboro case made a difference when the media reported on school shootings in Littleton, Colo., one year later?

EPILOGUE

On Aug. 11, 1998, a judge in Jonesboro found the two boys guilty of capital murder in the deaths of the four girls and their teacher. They also were found guilty of 10 counts of battery, or injury, to another teacher and nine additional students. Because they were juveniles when the crime was committed, they were sent to a state detention center. According to Arkansas law, they can be held only until they turn 21. At present, Arkansas only has facilities to hold them until they turn 18, although state officials have promised to correct that situation before they reach that age.

In April 1999, residents of Jonesboro — in a special broadcast of ABC's "Nightline" — sent their thoughts, prayers and advice to residents of Littleton, Colo., where another school shooting had just taken place. Once again, Americans began a debate about what provokes some young people to such violent behavior and what can be done to prevent future occurrences.

© Setting the scene

WHEN TRAGEDY HITS — A TRUE STORY

The scene is a small town in Arkansas. One spring day, at a local middle school, all hell breaks loose. Two students, dressed in full camouflage gear and armed with a cache of hunting rifles and ammunition, trip the school's fire alarm and then hide in the nearby woods. As other students file out of the school building, thinking the ringing alarm signifies a fire drill, the two armed students take aim and shoot, killing four girls and one of their teachers, who dies while trying to protect a student.

Form small groups of four or five students each. (You will need six groups.) Your teacher will have a collection of role cards. Each group should select a role card and read the description printed on the card.

Your assignment: To play the role you have selected and make decisions that best meet the needs of the person you are representing and others like him or her.

You will be given information about the case in installments. You must make decisions as a group, based on the information available to you at the time. Each time you receive information, you should discuss your strategies and approach, and then report your positions to the class as a whole.

The purpose of this exercise is to help you understand the role the media play in our society, and to evaluate the successes — or failures — of media outlets to transmit important information in times of crisis. At the end of the exercise, you will have access to information about the real story — school shootings in Jonesboro, Ark. — and to analysis of the media's performance during and after this tragedy.

© Role cards

AMY ACCURATE

(Reporter for the local newspaper, *The Jonesboro Sun*)

YOUR JOB:

To report the story as fully, fairly and accurately as you can, as fast as you can.

WHAT MAKES YOUR JOB DIFFICULT:

- © It's hard to get solid information about what's going on.
- © Local authorities — police, government officials, etc. — don't want to reveal too much. Their first task is to investigate the crime, not to give out information. Police officers also want to maintain order.
- © Local citizens are deeply concerned about protecting their privacy. They worry about how their town and their way of life will look to the rest of the world.

PETER PRINCIPAL

(The school principal)

YOUR JOB:

To protect the children in your school; to ensure that your school system is presented in an accurate — and positive — light; to help students cope with this tragedy and to project an image of control and good judgment — so parents and community members won't have to fear this awful event could recur.

WHAT MAKES YOUR JOB DIFFICULT:

- © Teachers and children are devastated by the shootings; they fear for their own continued safety.
- © You never have had to deal with the media on so enormous a scale and you don't have much experience in dealing with reporters.
- © Parents are clamoring for you to take charge, to figure out a way to help life to return to normal.

PIERRE ONAIRE

(A prominent television anchor from the top station in Canada)

YOUR JOB:

To report the story as fully, fairly and accurately as you can; to provide, for the rest of the world, background information about the location of the crime; and to frame the story in the context of larger issues (for example, increased violence in American culture).

WHAT MAKES YOUR JOB DIFFICULT:

- © You don't know the "lay of the land" (that is, you don't know who's knowledgeable in the community and so are hampered in access to sources of information).
- © To cover this important story, you must import expensive equipment and many staffers. Plus, your bosses at home are pressuring you to get a new angle on the story, to scoop the competition.
- © Local authorities — police, government officials, etc. — don't want to reveal too much. Their first task is to investigate the crime, not to give out information.

BARBARA MOTHERWELL

(Parent of two students; one is in second grade, the other, in seventh grade at Westside Middle School)

YOUR TASK:

To get as much information, as quickly as possible, about your own children and the children of your friends and neighbors; to find out how to protect your children from fear, nightmares, depression, anxiety; to learn how you will be able to encourage your children to continue attending school with optimism and enthusiasm for learning.

WHAT MAKES YOUR TASK DIFFICULT:

- ☉ You are frightened for the safety of your children and family members.
- ☉ You are worried about protecting the privacy of your own kids and the many others involved in this tragic event.
- ☉ You never have been at the center of an important news story and have no experience dealing with the media.

JANE Q. PUBLIC

(A reader and viewer from a neighboring state)

YOUR TASK:

As a news consumer, you need to learn as much as you can about the tragic shootings; to see if you can make sense of this event; to see if you can learn how your own family and community are different.

WHAT MAKES YOUR TASK DIFFICULT:

- ☉ You are hungry for new information; this is a senseless tragedy and you can't seem to get enough details about the community, about its citizens, about the victims of the crime and about the suspects.
- ☉ You don't understand how such an event could happen; you worry that it also could happen in your own home town.

DARRYL DETECTIVE

(Local chief of police)

YOUR JOB:

To investigate the crime as quickly and as effectively as possible; to find and charge the perpetrators; to make sure justice is served; to project an image of authority and good judgment to the citizens of the community and the world so as not to cause further alarm.

WHAT MAKES YOUR JOB DIFFICULT:

- ☉ The press and the public are clamoring for information, but you worry about revealing too much and thus compromising your ability to bring the suspects to trial.
- ☉ On the other hand, you know information must be released — to help allay people's fears and to develop sources of additional information you might be able to use in your investigations.
- ☉ Although you routinely work with the media in criminal cases, you never before have had to deal with an onslaught of media attention of this magnitude. Your staff is overwhelmed.

Part Five

SOME FINAL WORDS

© "If you're going to do rough stories, you're going to encounter rough seas." —BRANT HOUSTON, Editor

WHAT ABOUT THE INTERNET?

On Sept. 9, 1998, independent counsel Kenneth Starr delivered to the U.S. Congress a report describing possible grounds for impeachment of President Clinton. On Sept. 11, Congress released the full text of that report to the American people, via the Internet. And with that decision, Congress became the author of a new page in the annals of media history.

Starr's report contained detailed descriptions of the president's several sexual encounters with Monica Lewinsky, a White House intern. With no filtering of graphic details, the Internet gave Americans more than some wanted to know about the goings-on in the Oval Office.

Interestingly, it was Congress — and not the U.S. media — that brought to the American people the first explicit, full report of the president's improper relationship with one of his White House interns. Some newspapers printed the full text of Starr's report in special sections, with notations to readers that the report contained sexually explicit material. Newspapers encouraged readers to avoid the special sections if they so chose, and to read, instead, news analyses and summaries printed in their regular pages. Broadcast networks also issued advisories or said they would not repeat some of the more lurid descriptions contained in the Starr report.

Then, a few days later, Congress released videotapes of President Clinton's testimony before the grand jury empaneled by the independent counsel. Many networks aired those tapes as they were received, unedited.

FOR DISCUSSION:

© What trends do you predict for future reporting about public figures' private lives? Do you think the release of the Starr report had any impact on that trend?

© If you were a member of Congress, would you have voted for releasing the document? Why or why not? What relevance, if any, does the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution have to your argument?

© How do you feel about attempts in Congress to limit student access to parts of the Internet?

In the case of the full Starr report transmitted via the Internet, Americans could be confident that the text offered was an accurate presentation of the independent counsel's material. It had been released straight from the text delivered by Starr to the Congress.

But what about other material posted to the Internet? How are we to determine if material we receive online is accurate, balanced and fair?

German inventor Johann Gutenberg's development of the movable type letterpress in the 15th century allowed people to mass-produce printed material. This was an improvement from the way most news had been disseminated (by hand-written manuscripts and word of mouth). Even with the new invention, though, came doubts: Some people worried that the free flow of news might undermine the authority of society's leaders, who would not be able to control the spread of news as they had before. Over the centuries, technology improved. Faster printing presses, typewriters, linotype machines, radio, television, satellites and computers enabled news, books, magazines and newspapers to reach people around the world immediately.

Some say the Internet provides the most incredible publishing medium since the invention of the Gutenberg press. In 1995, according to Nielsen Media Research, only 18 million people in the United States had access to e-mail. In August 1998, 70.5 million people, or 26% of the population, had Internet access. Now, anyone with an inexpensive

home computer and Internet access can spread news and information to millions of people instantaneously.

The rapid development of this new medium has not happened without growing pains. Misinformation routinely is transmitted. Sometimes the news is just plain wrong. Hundreds of Web sites pass off stories about UFOs and sightings of "Bigfoot" as news. On the Internet, it's becoming harder to tell the difference between "mainstream" media and the alternative press. But it's interesting to note that hoaxes have plagued every new medium, and that even today, mature news organizations, newspapers, magazines, radio and television can be hoaxed.

Another problematic area related to the Internet has to do with the blurring of lines between advertising and editorial content. *The New York Times'* Web site raised eyebrows when it added links to its online book reviews allowing Web visitors to buy books online. Other newspaper Web sites have banner advertising on specific pages that looks like the reporter or newspaper has endorsed a product.

Just because we're using a new form of technology, does this mean we should abandon the old rules? No, say experts. We should preserve traditional journalism ethics in a modern medium. Codes of ethics are just as relevant for newspapers, radio and television as they are for the Internet.



COURTESY, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

HOW ARE WE TO JUDGE THE TRUTH?

There are more than 2,000 American newspapers on the Web and many, many more Web sites posting information that their purveyors want us to believe. Add to that the cacophony of individual voices transmitting ideas and opinions through e-mail, news groups and chat rooms. Whether on the Internet or in more traditional news media, consumers need to develop ways of assessing the accuracy and reliability of material they read, hear, see and receive.

Please turn to page 62. It offers "Tips for savvy news consumers" that you might want to duplicate and distribute to your students. These tips stress the importance of making critical judgments of material found in all media, including the Internet.

Please turn to pages 63-64. "Lessons to be learned: The importance of attribution, accuracy and honesty" is a student activity based on the story of Mike Barnicle, a columnist for *The Boston Globe* who lost his job after a series of journalistic ethics violations. The Barnicle account may help students understand why it is important to check and double check information sources, to verify facts and properly attribute any material from others that they include in their own work.

Please turn to page 65. This activity, "A very bad year?" helps students see how media organizations continually struggle to preserve their credibility, although sometimes their responses to journalistic transgressions seem to come too late.

An artist interprets the *New York Sun's* discovery of life on the moon in 1835. The moon story was a hoax, offered by newspaper as part of a six-part series surrounding the appearance of Halley's comet, but many readers believed it. The newspaper's sales reached record highs.

© Tips for savvy news consumers

How are we to judge if news stories, Internet accounts, photos or video clips are accurate and truthful? Using these tips will help you tell what's real.

1. THINK CRITICALLY ABOUT THE NEWS. ASK YOURSELF:

© **IS IT NEWS?** Is the story depicted as an event that actually happened? Or is it something else, such as opinion or advertising?

© **IS IT ACCURATE?** Consider the source of the information. Did it appear in a news publication, on a news broadcast or on an Internet site created by a news organization? Beyond that, who provided the information? Is the information factual?

© **IS IT FAIR?** If the issue being reported is complex, are different sides presented? Does the writer seem to want to persuade you of something? Does the publication, news-cast or Internet site seem to have a bias?

2. RECOGNIZE THAT TRUTH EMERGES IN BITS AND PIECES.

© **LEARN TO RELY ON A DIVERSITY OF NEWS SOURCES.**

Use many different media sources: newspapers, newscasts, online services, etc. Become familiar with the approaches of a variety of news people, news outlets and Web sites.

© **FORM YOUR OPINIONS OVER TIME.** Do not assume that a story you watch, read or download on any one day tells the whole story. Follow stories as they develop.

3. APPLY ALL YOU'VE LEARNED — AND EVEN MORE — WHEN EVALUATING INFORMATION ON THE WEB.

With a single keystroke or the click of a mouse, anyone with a home computer and Internet access can spread news to millions of people. But of all those people posting all that information, how many have double- and triple-checked the accuracy of their material? How many have biases they want you to believe? How many have picked up the material they are transmitting from other, possibly unreliable, sources? Ask yourself: Can this information be trusted? Does it ring true? Is it in good taste? Am I getting the whole story?

© Lessons to be learned:

THE IMPORTANCE OF ATTRIBUTION, ACCURACY AND HONESTY

It's mid-1998. In a case that came on the heels of several highly publicized journalistic transgressions, *The Boston Globe* fires a popular columnist.

Mike Barnicle had used, without attribution, comedian George Carlin's material in a column. Editors say he deceived them about the source of the material. They ask for Barnicle's resignation, but Barnicle refuses to resign. He says he has never read Carlin's book. The jokes, he claims, have been given to him by a friend and he simply neglected to check their origins. Six days after asking for his resignation, *The Globe* relents and reinstates Barnicle, although it suspends him for two months without pay. *The Globe's* editors say they changed their minds because they think the "punishment did not fit the crime."

But the case takes another turn: Barnicle's editors receive information that suggests they should check some of his earlier work. The editors find they can't confirm the existence of two young boys he had written about in a 1995 column. He had described both boys as cancer patients and wrote that the death of one had prompted that family to give the other a sizable cash gift. But Barnicle has his facts all wrong. He never had interviewed the families and had relied on secondhand evidence (again not attributed) for his column. *The Globe* found Barnicle guilty of dishonest and shoddy journalism — and more.

© What might Mike Barnicle have done to avoid problems with the column containing jokes and humorous material?

© What should he have done with the column about the young cancer patients?

© Do you agree with the way Mike Barnicle was treated by editors of *The Boston Globe*? Why or why not?

Continued on next page.

© Lessons to be learned (continued)

Suppose your social studies or government teacher has given your class an assignment. You are to do research about the positions and policies of the member of the U.S. House of Representatives from your area. Fill in the chart, describing how you would handle information found in each of the sources listed.

INFORMATION SOURCE	WOULD YOU TRUST THE SOURCE? (EXPLAIN)	HOW WOULD YOU DOUBLE-CHECK THE INFORMATION?
The congressman's own Web site		
Telephone interview with the congressman's administrative assistant		
Your local newspaper		
An Internet chat room		
A congressional directory you found on the Web		
A televised news report		
A congressional directory you found at the library		
A personal interview with your next-door neighbor, who also is a constituent		
A handbill placed on the windshield of your car by the congressman's opponent		

FOR DISCUSSION:

© Which sources, if any, would you trust? Why? What would you do to verify information received from each source? How would you handle conflicting information received from different sources?

© Are there any other sources, not listed on the chart, that might be helpful in your research? What are they?

© Which of the above sources of information would you actually use in developing your material? How would you cite them in your report?

© Would the content of the information have an impact on whether you trust the source? In other words, if the information about the congressman is neutral or critical, are you more likely to believe it than if the content is positive?

© A very bad year?

The spring and summer of 1998 saw several examples of media ethics violations.

© Stephen Glass, a reporter for *The New Republic*, was fired for fabricating all or part of 27 articles he wrote for that magazine and others.

Patricia Smith, writing for *The Boston Globe*, made up quotes and invented characters in her regular column. Smith was fired, as well.

© *The Cincinnati Enquirer* ran a major, in-depth article about Chiquita Brands International and then learned that Mike Gallagher, its high-profile reporter, had illegally taken voice mail messages from the fruit company. The newspaper issued front-page apologies to readers and to Chiquita for three consecutive days and agreed to pay more than \$10 million for alleging, among other things, that the company sprayed Costa Rican workers with dangerous pesticides and that its executives had engaged in duplicitous business practices. Gallagher was fired and faced criminal charges. (By spring 1999, he had pleaded guilty to two felony counts and was cooperating with law enforcement officials in order to avoid having to spend time in jail.)

© CNN and *Time*, in a joint report known as Operation Tailwind, stated that the U.S. military used the deadly nerve gas, sarin, on U.S. defectors in Laos during the Vietnam War. The information turned out to be unproven; the two media companies ultimately retracted the story and fired the producers who worked on it. A high-profile CNN correspondent on the story, Peter Arnett, who had defended himself by saying he contributed "not one comma" to the story, escaped with only a reprimand. (In spring 1999, about a year after this episode, Arnett and CNN parted company. Many observers say the fallout from Operation Tailwind contributed to the split between Arnett and CNN.)

In class discussion, comment on the responses by each of the media outlets to the ethics violations, telling whether you think additional responses were called for. What else might the media companies have done to correct these errors? What might they have done to avoid them in the first place?

Remember: Reporters who break the law in pursuit of the news are not entitled to any special protections. With the exception of Mike Gallagher, the journalists listed in these cases did not break any laws, though they were guilty of violating journalistic ethics. Which journalistic values did the reporters fail to honor?

On a separate sheet of paper, write a few paragraphs answering the questions in boldface type below.

Is the end of good journalism near? Does serious news reporting face an uncertain future?

Consider the following topics, and any others you think are appropriate, when crafting your position.

© Competition among media companies for readers and viewers

© A 24-hour news cycle, in which online reporting makes breaking news instantly available

© The unfiltered, unedited material that appears on some Internet sites

© A public hungry for sensational news

© A blurring of lines between news and entertainment

© The virtually unlimited memory of the latest computers and their ability to link video, audio and text

WHAT'S A NEWS ORGANIZATION TO DO?

Faced with general distrust of and dissatisfaction with media practices by readers, viewers and listeners, many news organizations have taken steps to win back their support. Here are a few things that news media can do to halt continued erosion of public trust:

© **BE AVAILABLE.** News organizations should publish phone numbers where readers and viewers can talk to "real people" on staff, not voice mail; they should offer e-mail access. They should be responsive to complaints.

© **CORRECT ERRORS PROMPTLY.** News organizations should explain their policies on corrections, on using sources, on other reporting techniques. When difficult decisions must be made to get a story, they should explain why they took those approaches and how they believe they considered all sides of sensitive situations.

© **CONTINUALLY ASK QUESTIONS OF REPORTERS; DOUBLE- AND TRIPLE-CHECK FACTS.** Editors and news directors should be on the lookout for warning signs of problems with stories their employees are reporting. They should have a system for editing and fact-checking that safeguards against mistakes.

© **APPOINT AN OMBUDSMAN, OR READERS' REPRESENTATIVE, TO TAKE CALLS AND QUESTIONS FROM READERS AND VIEWERS.** The organization's top executives should give the ombudsman the necessary independence so he or she can constructively criticize and effectively evaluate the news operation.

© **DIVERSIFY THE STAFF TO ENSURE THAT ALL VOICES ARE HEARD AND REPRESENTED.**

Other news organizations have advocated additional techniques for improving journalism and regaining the public trust:

Civic journalism

Civic or public journalism is a movement that has gained popularity in some circles within the past several years. Its supporters would have media organizations take a more activist role in their communities. News organizations that are proponents of civic journalism often sponsor community meetings, panel discussions or open forums as a way to encourage greater numbers of citizens to voice their concerns. Civic journalism is seen as a way to help solve community problems and re-engage citizens in the democratic process.

Some news organizations have interpreted civic journalism to mean using more in-depth reporting and allocating greater space to reader reaction. Opponents of civic journalism believe that, in essence, those techniques represent good, solid journalism — and that the added, activist steps of community engagement only compromise a news organization's status as objective observer.

News councils

News councils are voluntary bodies, made up of citizens and representatives of media organizations, that convene to address complaints about news coverage. By airing complaints and ruling in support of one side or the other, news councils, their proponents say, can ward off lengthy legal battles and, in the process, can strengthen the media's standing with the public.

Many media executives believe it is healthy to invite the public to comment on news organizations' missteps, though they also say they would prefer not to invite a formal public "policing" of their actions through a news council.

At present, there are only two active news councils: in Minnesota and Hawaii.

Credibility: Two points of view

The American Society of Newspaper Editors currently is conducting a multi-year project to study the credibility of American newspapers and to come up with strategies that newspapers can use to rebuild readers' trust. Through extensive research to study public attitudes about journalism, the credibility project has found:

- © The public sees too many factual errors and spelling or grammar mistakes in newspapers. Journalists agree.
- © The public perceives that newspapers do not consistently demonstrate respect for, and knowledge of, their readers and their communities. Journalists are much less critical of themselves.
- © The public sees bias in journalism, especially when it comes to deciding what stories get covered and how they are covered. Journalists are less likely to see a problem in this regard, although they do acknowledge that some groups receive more favorable (or unfavorable) media coverage than others.
- © The public believes that newspapers overplay sensational stories because they sell papers. Some journalists argue that newspapers simply are offering stories people want to read.
- © The public feels that newsroom values and practices sometimes are in conflict with their own priorities for their newspapers. The journalists' responses suggest that they're correct in this view.
- © People who have had actual experience with the news process are the most critical of media credibility. This also is true of journalists who have been subjects of news stories.

In spring 1999, eight daily newspapers began pilot programs to address public perceptions in the areas of accuracy, bias, reader connection and sensational stories.

WHERE TO FIND MORE ON MEDIA ETHICS AT THE NEWSEUM

A visit to the Newseum will help you and your students continue your exploration of media ethics. We're confident you will find many areas of interest, including the News History Gallery, the Video News Wall and news zipper, interactive areas, daily front pages, opinion polls, and more. If you want additional information related to the topic of this curriculum package, you might try:

- © Ethics Center, where students can respond to dilemmas faced by editors and photojournalists, and compare their judgments with those of Newseum visitors and news professionals. (Cases on the transparencies in this curriculum are only a sample of those presented in the Ethics Center.)
- © "Be a Photographer," "Be a Reporter," and "Be an Editor," three interactive computer games that allow visitors to "work" as journalists, fighting deadlines and weighing ethical issues while trying to get the story right.
- © Front-pages display, where students can look at the varying ways newspapers depict the same day's news.
- © "A Closer Look," when news breaks, which gives Newseum visitors greater detail about the news and how journalists cover it.
- © Small theaters, where short videos give behind-the-scenes accounts of dramatic moments in news history and an inside look at the everyday operations of news media.

**AFTER YOUR CLASS COMPLETES
"MEDIA ETHICS: WHERE DO YOU
DRAW THE LINE?"**

We hope your students will continue to be savvy news consumers long after they have completed the exercises in this curriculum package. To help them add to their understanding of media issues, you might encourage them to:

© Visit www.newseum.org, the Newseum's Web site, for periodic explorations of new ethics cases related to the media.

© Call your local newspaper and TV station to find out if they have written codes of ethics or guidelines for reporters and photographers. Ask for a copy of the guidelines and compare them with the codes in this curriculum guide.

© Bring to class additional cases, similar to those included within this guide, to promote regular, ongoing discussions of media ethics. When students find cases that seem to show questionable practices, we hope you will encourage them to write to the editors and/or news directors for clarification and explanation.

© Monitor photos printed on your local daily newspaper's front pages for two weeks or more. Who is depicted? Do the photographs reflect the diversity of your community as to ethnicity, gender, age? Do the photos reflect good taste and sound editorial judgment? If, after a reasonable time, students perceive an imbalance in photo representation and perhaps news coverage, or have questions relating to taste, ethics or privacy, encourage them to write to the newspaper's editor.

© Look for news in sources students might not regularly use: A national newspaper (*USA TODAY*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*); a business news show on television; a public broadcasting radio station; an online service. How does their coverage differ from coverage in media that students typically use? Students might track one particular story in several of these media outlets, noting whether different editorial philosophies or areas of emphasis seem to affect coverage.

© Take several photographs of an event, using different angles and perspectives, and different lenses (if available). When all photos are developed, students should examine the various shots to see if any represent the event more fairly than the others do. Students might write two different accounts of an event, using different photographs. How do the stories differ? Which story is "true"? Discuss with students how frame of reference or point of view affects the final image.

Student photographers should be mindful of ethical considerations when taking pictures. Generally, photographs are not allowed at professional theatrical events, so students who plan to take photos there should seek permission. In addition, students may be required to obtain releases (signed authorizations) from individuals photographed, especially if the photos are to be used in an advertising or promotional context. For greater detail on guidelines for student journalists, see *Springboard to Journalism*, published by Columbia Scholastic Press Advisers Association, Mail Code 5711, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027-6902; tel: 212/854-9400; fax: 212/854-9401.

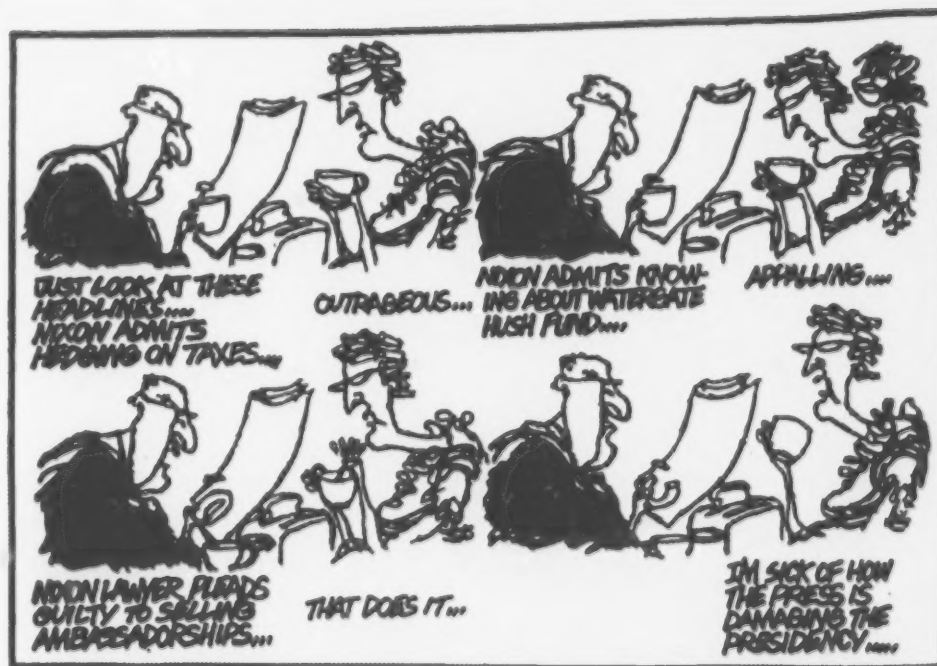
Selected Readings

- "Barnicle: A consequence of not enforcing a code," by Robert Phelps, *The American Editor*, American Society of Newspaper Editors, February 1999.
- "Can you improve your code of ethics? (or create a good code if you don't have one?)" by Bob Steele and Jay Black, *The American Editor*, American Society of Newspaper Editors, February 1999.
- "Doing Ethics in Journalism," by Jay Black, Bob Steele and Ralph Barney for the Society of Professional Journalists, Allyn and Bacon, 1995.
- "Ethics, the Press and the Presidency," Media Studies Center, The Freedom Forum, New York, 1998.
- "Examining Our Credibility: Perspectives of the Public and the Press," by Christine D. Urban for the American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1999. (Available from ASNE are Urban's 108-page report about the credibility project and a videotape, with viewers' guide, that includes a hypothetical case suitable for group discussion.)
- "A History of News," by Mitchell Stephens, Harcourt Brace, 1997.
- "Hold the Press: The Inside Story on Newspapers," by John Maxwell Hamilton and George A. Krinsky, Louisiana State University Press, 1996.
- "In Search of Better Journalism: A Survey of Journalism Improvement Projects," by Richard P. Kleeman, The Media Institute, Washington, D.C., 1998.
- "Journalism Values Handbook," a project of the ASNE Ethics & Values Committee with funding from the Robert R. McCormick Tribune Foundation, research and materials by The Harwood Group, American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1995-96.
- "Living Ethics: Developing Values in Mass Communication," by Michael J. Bugeja, Allyn and Bacon, 1996.
- "Making ethics part of the newsroom routine," by William F. Woo, *The American Editor*, American Society of Newspaper Editors, February 1999.
- "Media Ethics: Cases and Moral Reasoning," by Clifford G. Christians, Mark Fackler, Kim B. Rotzoll, Kathy Brittain McKee, Longman, 1998.
- "Media Mistakes of '98: How editors can learn from them," Media Studies Center, The Freedom Forum, New York, 1999.
- "Privacy: What's legal? What's ethical? What's likely?" The Freedom Forum Pacific Coast Center, 1997.
- "What's Fair?" *Media Studies Journal*, Media Studies Center, The Freedom Forum, New York, Spring/Summer 1998.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ROSALIND G. STARK works with media-related and education organizations as writer, editor and strategic planner. In addition to "Media Ethics: Where Do You Draw the Line?" she has written "Is Seeing Believing ... How Can You Tell What's Real?" for the Newseum's education department. She is co-author, with Dana Bullen, of "Perverse Result: How the European Convention on Human Rights supports global restrictions on press freedom," for the World Press Freedom Committee.

From 1984 to 1995, she was with the Newspaper Association of America Foundation, serving first as publications director and then as senior vice president and director.



TRIBUNE MEDIA SERVICES, INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION.

EVALUATION "Media Ethics: Where Do You Draw the Line?"

Please complete this form after you have used some or all of the curriculum package with your class.

Return evaluation form to:

Education Department FAX: 703/522-4831

Newseum

1101 Wilson Blvd., 19th floor

Arlington, VA 22209

Your answers will help us develop additional curriculum packages.

NAME (OPTIONAL)

SCHOOL

ADDRESS

CITY

STATE

ZIP

TEL

FAX

E-MAIL

SUBJECT(S) YOU TEACH

GRADE LEVEL(S)

NUMBER OF STUDENTS WHO USED THE CURRICULUM MATERIALS

Please rate the curriculum package "Media Ethics: Where Do You Draw the Line?" by placing a check mark in the appropriate column.

	EXCELLENT	GOOD	AVERAGE	DID NOT MEET MY NEEDS	NOT USED
Transparencies					
Case studies					
Large group role-playing activity					
Curriculum guide					

We welcome additional comments about the teaching package:

Author's note: New developments in Case 12. Please turn to pages 49-51.

ABC News Now Owes Only \$2 to Food Lion

"The real story" in the ABC News-Food Lion case tells us the supermarket chain had won a substantial damage award against ABC News for using hidden cameras and undercover reporting techniques. Because ABC News reporters posed as employees to expose Food Lion's unsafe food-handling practices, a jury found ABC News guilty of fraud. It awarded \$5.5 million to Food Lion; page 50 explains that a judge eventually reduced the award to \$315,000.

But, on Oct. 20, 1999, a federal appeals court threw out all but \$2 of the damage award the jury had ordered ABC News to pay. In a 2-1 ruling, the court upheld a conviction for trespassing and breach of loyalty against the two who lied on their employment applications

(failing to disclose they were actually employees of ABC News). In expressing its opinion, the court wrote that Food Lion's arguments against the news organization were attempts at "an end-run" around the First Amendment. While acknowledging that ABC News used deceptive tactics, the judge noted that ABC's aim was to help, not harm, the public. Food Lion is reviewing the court's decision with its lawyers and may still appeal this recent ruling.

What does all this mean for readers of Media Ethics: Where Do You Draw The Line?

Stay tuned. Keep reading, watching, listening. Follow stories over time.

EXAMPLE 1 The story of Ruth Snyder

The year is 1928. You're assigned to cover the execution of a convicted murderer. Your newspaper is fighting a "circulation war." This is your chance to scoop the competition. The execution is set for tonight. How will you cover the story?

A. Get a great artist to sketch the electric chair execution.

B. Sneak a hidden camera in and photograph the moment of death.

C. Get there early and interview the family of the victim.



NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

EXAMPLE 2 Terror in Oklahoma City

A powerful bomb has ripped through a large federal building. Hundreds of people are feared dead. You are a network news producer. People want to know who did this. Federal agents and terrorism experts say the blast has the mark of Islamic fundamentalists. The FBI is looking for dark-skinned men of Mideast origin. What do you do?

- A. Get the story out right now. Experts say fundamentalists did it. Help the FBI catch them.
- B. Air the search for suspects. But keep digging for facts. Don't just quote speculation.



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

EXAMPLE 3 Watergate's "Deep Throat"

You're the publisher of a big-city newspaper. Your investigation of a huge political scandal is based on the work of two young reporters. They have a source who refuses to be named. So far, all his facts check out. But now he's implicating the president. The stakes are high. Can you continue to stand by an anonymous source?

- A. No. An anonymous source may lie. Get your facts on the record.
- B. Yes. The only way to get the truth is by protecting your source.
- C. Yes, but confirm his facts with other sources before printing them.



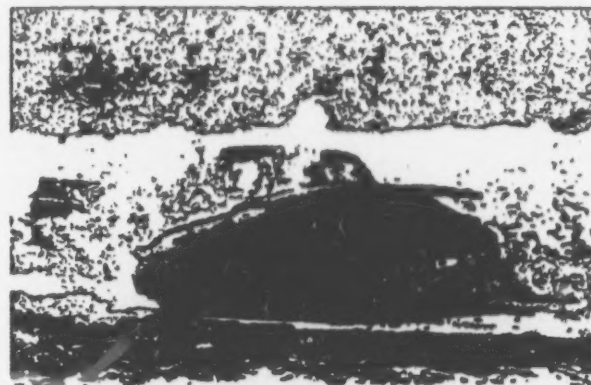
EXAMPLE 4 "Dateline NBC" crosses a line

You're a producer of a network news magazine. You've learned about a teen-ager who died in a fiery crash. A design defect in his pickup truck is suspected. Telling this story might save lives. But after repeated attempts, you can't get one of these trucks to explode. It isn't good TV without riveting video. What do you do?

A. Scrap the story. The truck won't blow up. Maybe it's safe.

B. Rig the pickup to explode. The story is important. Video is crucial.

C. Rig the explosion video, but admit that it's a "simulation."



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

© "This curriculum will help students understand the important work that journalists do every day. It should help teachers and students dig into the complexities of good decision making through active discussion of real life situations. "Media Ethics: Where Do You Draw the Line?" is a dynamic tool for teachers to help build students' reasoning, problem-solving, and communication skills — skills that are more rarely valuable in the world outside the classroom."

RENEE HORBS

Director, News Ethics Project

University of Virginia, Charlottesville

© "The curriculum is outstanding and I can't wait to start this year. Your case studies will motivate hours of student discussion and debate."

KATHLEEN D. ZWEIBEL

Deputy Executive Director, National Children's Advocacy Center

Memphis, TN



The Freedom Forum World Center

1101 Wilson Blvd.

Arlington, VA 22209

Tel: Toll free 888/newseum or 703/284.3544

www.newseum.org

JONESBORO

Were the Media Fair?



Rodney Freeman, The Joplin Star

Arkansas State Police media specialist Bill Sadler briefs the media at Westside Middle School the day after the shootings.

THE  FREEDOM FORUM
FREE PRESS. FREE SPEECH. FREE SPIRIT.

The Freedom Forum Board of Trustees

Charles L. Overby, Chairman and
Chief Executive Officer
Peter S. Prichard, President

Allen H. Neuhauser, Founder

Harry W. Brooks Jr.
John E. Heselden
Madelyn P. Jennings
Malcolm R. Kirschenbaum
Bette Bao Lord
Brian Mulroney
Will Norton Jr.
John C. Quinn
Carl T. Rowan
Josefina A. Salas-Porras
John Seigenthaler
Alan B. Shepard

World Center
1101 Wilson Blvd.
Arlington, VA 22209
Tel: 703/528-0800
Fax: 703/284-3570
E-mail:
news@freedomforum.org
Internet: www.freedomforum.org

Media Studies Center
580 Madison Ave., 42nd floor
New York, NY 10022
Tel: 212/317-6500
Fax: 212/317-6572
E-mail: talk@mediastudies.org

This report is available on *free*.
The Freedom Forum Web site at
www.freedomforum.org. Copies
also may be ordered by phone.

Order publications by phone:
The Freedom Forum makes
available single copies of a wide
range of conference reports,
studies, speeches and other
publications related to the
media, journalism education
and the First Amendment. Call
800/830-3733.

Staff
Cheryl Arvidson
Patrice L. Casey
Martha FitzSimon
Robert H. Giles
Robert J. Haiman
Lacy McDowell
Christy Mumford Jerding
Marie Lewis
Scott MacLay
Lawrence T. McGill
Sheila Owens
Meredith Peck
Gene Policinski
Don Ross
Rod Sandeen
Ed Turner

Special thanks to the
management and staff of
The Jonesboro Sun.

Contents

INTRODUCTION:

Why The Freedom Forum examined coverage of the Jonesboro shootings 1
Robert H. Giles

More than 200 media people converged on Jonesboro 2

IN JONESBORO:

An in-depth report on a community's reaction to "media madness" 3
Cheryl Arvidson and Gene Policinski

Why and when media decisions were made to identify the juvenile suspects 14

THE JONESBORO SUN:

How the local newspaper covered the story, and why it received almost universal praise 15
Robert J. Haiman

PRINT REPORT:

An analysis of selected national and regional print-media coverage 21
Lawrence T. McGill

Media sought quick, easy answer to the "why" of the tragedy 25
Christy Mumford Jerding and Cheryl Arvidson

TELEVISION REPORT:

An analysis of local, regional and network television coverage 29
Ed Turner

SPEAK OUT:

About 300 Jonesboro residents attended a community forum on media coverage, conduct 35
Martha FitzSimon

Jonesboro provides lessons for media, community **Inside back cover**

5 died in shooting

Four students and a teacher at Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Ark., died in the shootings on the school grounds on March 24, 1998. The story attracted worldwide media attention. The dead: Natalie Brooks, 11, Paige Ann Herring, 12, Stephanie Johnson, 12, Britthney Varner, 11, and Shannon Wright, 32.



Jonesboro residents tell The Freedom Forum's Kerry Brock (onstage) how media coverage of the shootings affected their community.

Examining Jonesboro coverage provides lessons for press, public

BY ROBERT H. GILES

This report on how the press covered the schoolyard shootings in Jonesboro, Ark., is part of a multiyear examination of fairness in the news media by The Freedom Forum.

We call this initiative "Free Press/Fair Press." Its mission is to enhance our free press, to increase fairness in the news media and to improve public perception of fairness in the press. We began this project in 1997 with the premise that public standards for the news media are higher than ever, but some journalists may not understand that. Conversely, the mainstream news media have improved greatly, and the public may not be aware of that. Our examination of fairness is taking place in a number of ways with the purpose of improving understanding between the public and the press.

Three weeks after the tragedy at Westside Middle School, The Freedom Forum joined with *The Jonesboro Sun* and the College of Communications at Arkansas State University to invite residents of the community to talk about their perceptions of how the press covered this story.

This seemed to be a significant opportunity to hear from a community that was attempting to cope with a tragic event that also had been the focus of extraordinary national and international media coverage.

About 300 attended the "Speak Out." Many who came forward to share their thoughts had specific criticisms of the coverage: intrusive behavior by journalists armed with

microphones and cameras, invading the privacy of victims; reliance on children as news sources; and drawing quick conclusions about the character of life in a rural, Southern town — a perception that was deeply resented as a stereotype.

Others who spoke recognized the important role of the press in telling this story and in helping the community as it sought to cope with the tragedy. *The Jonesboro Sun* was praised repeatedly for the balance, the accuracy and the help that its coverage provided.

The intense and wide-ranging discussion that evening suggested a further examination of how the press covered this story. In the weeks that followed, The Freedom Forum sent a team of reporters to Jonesboro to follow up on the comments and stories heard that night. We tracked down reports of inappropriate

behavior by individual journalists. We interviewed victims and thoughtful observers of the news-gathering. We talked to journalists who covered the story, and to their editors. We assessed the coverage of *The Jonesboro Sun*, national print media and regional and national television news organizations.

Our purpose is to learn the lessons of the Westside Middle School story and to share them with journalists and the public, in the belief that from experiences such as this we can better understand the role and the responsibilities of a free and fair press.

“Our purpose is to learn the lessons of the Westside Middle School story and to share them with journalists and the public.”

Robert H. Giles, a senior vice president of The Freedom Forum and executive director of the Media Studies Center, directs the "Free Press/Fair Press" project. His newspaper career began 40 years ago at the Akron (Ohio) *Beacon Journal*. Before joining The Freedom Forum in 1997, he was editor and publisher of *The Detroit News*. Both the *Bureau Journal* and the *News* won Pulitzer Prizes under his leadership. He is a past president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors.

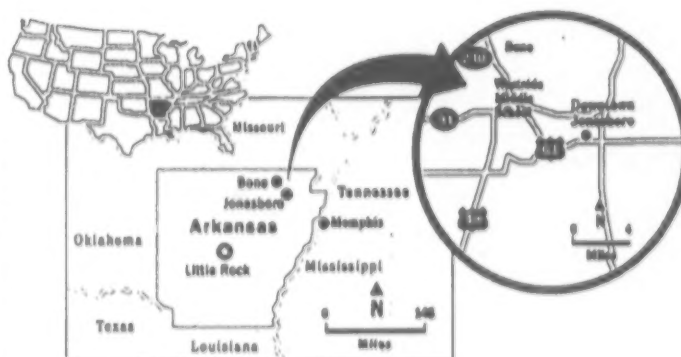
Media staffing in Jonesboro

More than 200 were sent to cover school shootings

About 70 U.S. and foreign news organizations sent more than 200 reporters, photographers and support personnel to cover the shootings in Jonesboro, Ark., according to a Freedom Forum survey.

The media staffing levels shown here reflect the peak strength of an organization. CBS, for example, initially dispatched eight people to Jonesboro after the March 24 shootings, but that number more than doubled (to 17) before the week was out.

This survey covers March 24 to 31 and does not include local and regional news media.



U.S. television networks

CNN	30	(5 on-air; 25 support)
NBC	22	(5 NBC on-air; 2 MSNBC on-air; 15 support)
CBS	17	(3 on-air; 14 support)
ABC	15	(3 on-air; 12 support)
Fox News Channel	15	(2 on-air; 13 support)

U.S. newspapers

<i>The New York Times</i>	7
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	4
<i>(New York) Daily News</i>	3
<i>The Dallas Morning News</i>	3
<i>Houston Chronicle</i>	3
<i>Chicago Tribune</i>	2
<i>Fort Worth Star-Telegram</i>	2
<i>New York Post</i>	2
<i>The Philadelphia Inquirer</i>	2
<i>USA TODAY</i>	2
<i>The Washington Post</i>	2
<i>Atlanta Journal and Constitution</i>	1
<i>The Boston Globe</i>	1
<i>The Columbus (Ohio) Dispatch</i>	1
<i>The Hartford (Conn.) Courant</i>	1
<i>Milwaukee Journal Sentinel</i>	1
<i>The Miami Herald</i>	1
<i>St. Louis Post-Dispatch</i>	1

Supermarket tabloids

<i>The Star</i>	1
<i>National Enquirer</i>	1

Other television networks

BBC-TV (United Kingdom)	4
Danish Broadcasting	4
TV Asahi (Japan)	4
Aftonbladet (Sweden)	2
Channel 4 (United Kingdom)	2
Norwegian Broadcasting Corp.	2
Gancie Television (United Kingdom)	1

Other newspapers

<i>The Mirror</i> (London)	2
<i>The Guardian</i> (London)	2
<i>Daily Record</i> (Scotland)	2
<i>The Times</i> (London)	1
<i>The Sunday Times</i> (London)	1
<i>The Observer</i> (London)	1
<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> (London)	1
<i>Evening Standard</i> (London)	1
<i>The Mail On Sunday</i> (London)	1
<i>The Herald</i> (Scotland)	1
<i>Newsletter</i> (Ireland)	1
<i>The Irish Times</i>	1
<i>South China Morning Post</i> (Hong Kong)	1
<i>Toronto Sun</i>	1

Wire and photo services

The Associated Press	7
UPI	3
Knight Ridder	3
Agence France-Presse (France)	2
Sygma (London)	2
Black Star	1
Deutsche Presse-Agentur (Germany)	1
Norwegian News Agency	1
Reuters	1
SABA Photos	1

Newsmagazines

<i>Time</i>	4
<i>U.S. News & World Report</i>	3
<i>Newsweek</i>	3
<i>MacLeans</i> (Canada)	2

Radio networks

National Public Radio	4
CBS Radio Network	3
BBC Radio (United Kingdom)	2

Other

"Inside Edition"	4
<i>People</i>	2
HBO	1
"Montel Williams Show"	1

Sources: Ed Trautt, *The Jonesboro Sun*; Keith Merritt, KASU, Jonesboro; Hubert Brodell, mayor of Jonesboro; assignment editors; bureau chiefs; network representatives; Nexis; Jonesboro hotel registries

Reporting benefits from openness of officials

'One bad apple' can sour a community's opinion of the media

BY CHERYL ARVIDSON AND GENE POLICINSKI

Someday, when he is old enough to understand, Clayton Wilson's mother will give him a scrapbook filled with news stories about his 11-year-old sister, Brithney Varner; so he can learn more about who she was and how she lost her life so tragically in a barrage of gunfire outside Westside Middle School.

"She just thought he was wonderful. She worshipped that baby," Suzann Wilson said of her daughter, who died along with three other girls and a teacher on March 24. Authorities say Andrew Golden, 11, and Mitchell Johnson, 13, opened fire on their classmates from a nearby woods after drawing them outdoors with a false fire alarm.

Mitchell Wright, whose wife, Shannon, was the teacher killed in the attack, will be able to give their son, Zane, now two-and-a-half-years-old, videotapes of two interviews he did with network television shows about his wife and her heroism. When the shooting began, Shannon Wright threw herself in front of a student, Emma Pittman, sustaining fatal wounds while saving the youngster.

If "Good Morning America" and "PrimeTime Live" had been interested in a "how do you feel" interview, Wright said, "I wouldn't have done it. But when they approached me with that (heroism) angle, I felt I owed it to her. I owed it to my son."

In the countryside a few miles outside Jonesboro, where the victims of the Westside shootings and the suspects lived, the Rev. Benny Baker of the Bono Church of Christ has reached more people with his ministry than he ever dreamed possible. Two months after the tragedy, Baker had received more than 16,000 pieces of mail, from every state in the union and 28 foreign countries, and about 1,300 e-mails. "I can't even count the phone calls," said Baker, whose congregation includes the Wrights and the families of two other vic-

tims of the attack.

And Gretchen Woodard, the mother of suspect Mitchell Johnson, sets aside two hours a day to answer the "literally thousands" of cards and letters she has received from the community and from all over the United States.

"It has touched my heart," Woodard said, her eyes filling with tears. "It's therapy to me. They took five minutes of their lives for somebody they didn't even know. That overwhelms me."

Those are some of the positive consequences of the media madness that descended on Jonesboro and the surrounding rural areas after the shots rang out at 12:30 p.m. on a Tuesday.

That those individuals can find something good to say about the hundreds of articles and countless hours of television coverage devoted to the Jonesboro shootings speaks volumes about how the media performed.

Just as news of the day eschews the ordinary for the unusual or significant, a discussion of media performance tends to focus on those reporters who cross the line of appropriate behavior, even though countless reporters behaved admirably and professionally in their pursuit of the story.

Virtually everyone interviewed for this report gave the majority of reporters who came to Jonesboro relatively high marks for accuracy and fairness, taste and sensitivity. But the roughly 10% who pushed too hard or behaved callously are



Mitchell Wright: "When [television programs] approached me with that (heroism) angle, I felt I owed it to ... my son."

Freedom Forum staffers Cheryl Arvidson and Gene Policinski went to Jonesboro in May to gather material for this report. Arvidson is a veteran political and investigative reporter and a former Washington bureau chief for the *Dallas Times Herald*. Policinski has been a journalist for 30 years, working in print and electronic media as a reporter, editor, anchor and program host. He is one of the founding editors of *USA TODAY*.

The first 24 hours

There was nothing extraordinary about the way the news of the March 24 Jonesboro school shootings first got out.

On the scene within minutes of the 12:30 p.m. shootings were reporters from *The Jonesboro Sun* and KAIT Channel 8, an ABC affiliate and the only television station in town. Just 71 minutes later, The Associated Press bureau in Little Rock filed its first newswire report. Within three hours, reporters from nearby Memphis, Tenn., and Little Rock were arriving.

But then print and broadcast reporters from around the nation and from around the world — Japan, Britain, Germany, Hong Kong — flooded into the northeastern Arkansas city of 51,000. By nightfall hundreds of reporters, photographers, camera crews, producers, correspondents and stringers were in town.

Yet the very first signals of the tragedy came to local reporters from two very standard sources:

- The sound of sirens from emergency vehicles headed for Westside Middle School.
- Police broadcasts overheard on newsroom radio scanners.

From the personal recollections of reporters, photographers, medical and law enforcement authorities, police and hospital records, published articles and television broadcasts, this is the story of how the first 24 hours of news coverage of the Jonesboro tragedy unfolded:

At Westside Middle

School, students and teachers are in their fifth-period classrooms or at lunch. Construction workers are on the roof. Sometime late in the morning, a half mile from the school, two boys park a white van in a cul-de-sac. Dressed in camouflage — not unusual in an area where hunting is a major sporting activity — they walk into the woods.

Curt Hodges, *The Jonesboro Sun*

One of the first photos from the scene shows emergency personnel rushing a victim to a waiting ambulance.

the ones who are remembered.

"It's kind of like one bad apple don't spoil the whole bushel, but when it comes to the media, one bad apple gives you a bad opinion as a community of the whole bushel," Craighead County Sheriff Dale Haas said.

In interviews in early May with individuals involved in the story, it was the conduct of the media, rather than the content of their reports, that prompted the greatest criticism. There were very few instances of misinformation in news reports, and almost all of those came early on, when the story was first breaking.

Much of the credit for the overall accuracy and completeness of the media coverage goes to local and state law enforcement officials, medical personnel and the judge who presided over the initial court hearing for the boys being held as juveniles in connection with the killings. From the outset, those officials each made decisions designed to get the max-

imum amount of information out to the media — and thus to the public — as rapidly as possible.

A more secretive or less candid approach to the story easily could have changed the tone of the coverage and prompted vastly more intrusive behavior on the part of reporters, photographers, producers and broadcast crews sent to Jonesboro.

The early hours

Curt Hodges, who has been on the staff of *The Jonesboro Sun* since 1961 and worked in local television news for about 10 years before that, was heading back to the newspaper office from an assignment when he stopped at a local auto-parts shop to make a purchase. While he was there, a man ran into the store and said there appeared to be a bad accident at the intersection near the Westside school complex, because lots of ambulances and police cars were heading that way.

"I called the 911 center, and they told me what it was,"

12:30 Veteran reporter Curt Hodges of *The Jonesboro Sun* has finished an assignment and stops at an auto-parts shop to pick up a part for his car. Television reporter Bryant Huddleston of KAIT is in the station's newsroom.

At that moment, the fire alarm at Westside Middle School goes off. A youngster is seen running from the school. A teacher later recalls that students walked quickly out of the school in an orderly fashion.

Suddenly, several students are hit by gunfire coming from a wooded area about 100 yards away. Teacher Shannon Wright is mortally wounded as she shields a student. Within seconds, four students are dead and nine students and another teacher are injured.

12:38 The first frantic call for help to 911 from the school is logged at Jonesboro Central Dispatch. A female voice says: "We've got children shot at Westside High School, Middle School ... we need an ambulance as soon as possible." A second call comes in within seconds. By 12:44 p.m. there will be seven calls.

City police and Craighead County sheriff's deputies are sent to the school. Emergency calls go out to the city's three ambulance services.

12:40 KAIT's Huddleston overhears a dispatcher on the newsroom radio scanner saying: "We got two students down and a teacher down." His first thought is that he's hearing a Memphis police broadcast — "Jonesboro just does not have a lot of violent crime" — but then "right behind that I heard 'Westside School,' and I was in shock.

"I grabbed my bag and my jacket and ran out," Huddleston said. Seconds later, KAIT's chief engineer runs to the station's "live truck" to drive it to the school.

Sun reporter Hodges is inside the auto-parts shop when a man runs in and says "there must be something going on at Barry's truck stop," at the intersection about a mile from Westside, judging by the number of police cars and ambulances that have roared past.

Hodges calls the Jonesboro police department's 911 center and "they told me what it was ... I was about five miles from the school." He calls his office, then drives to Westside.

Hodges recalled. "I was about five miles from the school. I called the office, and the sports editor answered the phone. I told him what was going on, and I said, 'Rally everybody you can get.'"

Within 10 minutes Hodges was at the school. He and a local television reporter were the first journalists on the scene. "I could hear kids back there crying. I could hear people hollering," Hodges said.

There are no news photos of the shooting victims lying outside the school. Hodges had a camera with him, and did take a widely distributed photo of one of the victims being rushed from the scene on a gurney. But as he was about to round the corner of the school to where the shootings had taken place, he encountered a police officer who said, "You don't need to be around there."

Hodges said he told the officer he wasn't going to take photographs. "I know it," the officer said, "but it's really bad, and I would really appreciate it if you wouldn't go back there." Hodges obeyed. Did he consider disregarding the officer so he could see, and maybe photograph, the victims and the blood? "No, I didn't. I might have if I worked different, but I never have worked that way."

"We don't work that way," echoed John Trout Jr., the editor and owner of *The Jonesboro Sun*, in whose office the interview with Hodges was taking place. "Never have," the reporter and the editor said in unison.

"We don't write policies down, but we have a policy of consideration for the people we cover. That doesn't mean we have consideration for shooters or mass murderers or anything like that, but (we do for) the victims," said Trout, whose family has owned the newspaper since 1903. "We live here. All of us have been here all of our lives. We have a certain amount of sensitivity as a staff, and that's the way we want to do it. That's the posture of the newspaper."

"Anybody who works here would do the same thing," Hodges said. "Because they know we wouldn't use it (a gory photo)," Trout said, continuing his reporter's thoughts. "If we had had (a photo of) all of the kids and people spread out and dead, we would not have used it."

Nor did Hodges get the name of the shooting victim on the gurney whom he did photograph. "It didn't occur to me to ask who it was because they were busy (saving) a life, and I'm not going to interfere with that," he said.

"We don't pull off of anything, and obviously, we're tough on a lot of things, but we're not tough on victims," Trout said. "You don't have to have total blood and guts to tell a story."

Trout was on vacation in Santa Fe, N.M., and his two sons, who serve as assistant publishers of the newspaper, were in Fayetteville, Ark., when the shootings occurred. Ed and Bob Trout had a private plane, so they headed back immediately and took over all the calls coming into the newspaper; John Trout returned the following day. Thus the first day's coverage was planned and executed by the news staff of 16 reporters and editors, three photographers, four sports staffers, some part-time students and two society editors.

"Of course I was in touch with them by telephone, but about the only thing I did is that we discussed identifying the [suspects] and of course, I made an immediate decision, as [the staff] had, too, that we would identify them when we were certain, and we got certain very quickly," Trout said.

"I had no trouble with it," Trout said of the decision to run names and photos of the boys who were taken into custody in the woods shortly after the ambush. Although Arkansas law does not allow news coverage of juvenile court proceedings unless the judge permits it (and has in this case), it is open on the question of identifying juvenile offenders.

"We confirmed the identity with all kinds of sources, six or seven of them, so we were sure, we were certain. That was the only thing that I said — be right, be certain. You don't want to be wrong on something like that," Trout said.

Although the authorities did not release the suspects' names, their identities quickly became common knowledge throughout the community and among the media. By the next



Carl Hodges, *Jonesboro Sun* staffer, said he didn't try to photograph victims: "I never have worked that way."

12:45 Police alert the St. Bernard's Regional Medical Center, where doctors and officials quickly pull out a disaster plan that includes dealing with a "media crush."

12:50 Hodges and Huddleston arrive at Westside school within a minute or two of each other. Hodges has a camera and takes some of the first photos that will appear in newspapers worldwide.

Initial photos from the scene are of students on stretchers being rushed to ambulances, tearful and terrorized students, dazed and stricken bystanders and teachers and police walking across bloodstained concrete sidewalks.

Huddleston later calculates that during the 10 minutes it took him to drive to the school, sheriff's deputies — guided by the construction workers, who point to the woods where they saw movement and smoke from gunfire — already have captured the two boys who will be charged with the shootings.

In the state capital of Little Rock, state police media spokesman Bill Sadler gets his first calls from reporters, "a local TV station and a few minutes later from The Associated Press. ... I was just getting up to speed myself ... all we knew ... was we had a shooting at a school west of Jonesboro."

1:00 Other staffers from the *Sun* and KAIT are arriving at Westside, along with scores of frantic parents. Police have moved Hodges and Huddleston (who now is supported by the "live truck" driven by chief engineer Gerald Ericson) behind a police line. Huddleston decides not to force interviews with survivors.

KAIT news director Harvey Cox, who had been home having lunch, arrived at the school five minutes behind Huddleston after following ambulances that were passing his home. He recalled later feeling the same emotion: "I said to Bryant 'I want you to remember one thing. We don't go up and stick our camera in people's faces. ... If they want to talk to us, they'll come up to us.' And sure enough, they did."

After a quick conference with his supervisor, Sadler is headed toward the Little Rock airport to catch a plane to Jonesboro. As he boarded the airplane, "I began making preparations over a cell phone."



Floyd Johnson, Jonesboro police chief: His counterpart in Pearl, Miss., told him, "What you need to start preparing for is the media."

morning, the boys' names had been published in national and local newspapers and aired on the radio and network television.

That is one of the things that was the hardest on Mitchell Johnson's mother. Gretchen Woodard says she had phone calls from friends — long before she heard anything from law enforcement officials — telling her that her son was a suspect. "I grew up believing, very naively, that if you're a juvenile, you do have certain rights. Not a lot of them, but you do have certain rights, and one of the rights is not to have your name and picture published. ... Not that it wouldn't have come out, that's not what I'm saying. But for God sakes, wait until after the hearing."

Brithney Varner's mother and Shannon Wright's husband disagreed.

"If you're going to print my child's name, you should print theirs," said Suzann Wilson, Brithney's mother. "They put themselves in the paper as far as I'm concerned. I certainly don't want them having more rights than my daughter had."

"I wondered how it got out so quick, but in this case, it needed to get out there," Mitchell Wright said.

About two hours later, after several other *Sun* staffers and photographers had arrived at the school, Hodges headed back to the newspaper. As he was leaving, he saw helicopters hired by television stations from Memphis and Little Rock circling the school grounds. Video taken from those aircraft aired around 3 p.m. (CST), 4 p.m. on the East Coast. The media circus was about to begin.

Law and order

Not long after the first reports of the Jonesboro shootings broke, Jonesboro Police Chief Floyd Johnson got a telephone call from his counterpart in Pearl, Miss., where a teen-ager is accused of a shooting spree in a high school in October that left two dead and several wounded.

"The police chief in Pearl ... said, 'I'll come up there. I'll send some people up there. I'll give you all the information I can, but what you need to start preparing for is the media. You've never seen anything like what's going to happen.' I

thought I had," Johnson said.

Johnson was no novice to big news stories. He was a new sheriff in 1968 when a devastating tornado struck Jonesboro and left 34 dead, and he also was sheriff in 1973 when another tornado destroyed a third of the town and took three lives. He thought he'd seen it all in terms of the media, but he was wrong.

"For the most part, if you were dealing with a reporter ... one on one, they were very sympathetic, seemed to have a lot of sympathy for the folks. But I would have to compare them with a bunch of animals whenever they all get together with their cameras. They'll run into each other, they'll run over you, they'll park in the street, they'll block aislesways," he said.

Bill Sadler, the media specialist for the Arkansas State Police in Little Rock, heard about the shootings at Westside about 12:40 p.m. because one of the initial 911 calls went to the troop headquarters office in Jonesboro. He got his first media call at 12:50 p.m. and had met with the director of the state police by 1 p.m. They decided immediately that Sadler should go to Jonesboro; he was on a plane within an hour of the shooting.

"Even as I boarded the aircraft, I began making preparations over a cell phone with every media representative that I could think of who would be interested in that story on a local basis. I knew it was going to be of statewide interest, so I contacted our state news media, scheduled a 4 p.m. news conference, making notifications while en route," Sadler said. "We landed, and I went straight to our state headquarters where I received a telephone briefing and a briefing from one of the troopers who had been at the scene. Minutes, literally minutes, before the 4 o'clock news conference, I met the prosecutor and Sheriff Haas for the first time and explained to them what I felt like we were going to be able to address in that news conference based on what little information we had at that time."

When he had walked through the door at state police headquarters in Jonesboro at 2:30 p.m., Sadler said, he was handed messages from dozens of news organizations. Twenty-four hours later, hundreds of media representatives were in

12:00 KAIT news anchor Diana Davis goes on the air with the first televised report of the shooting. She says "there has been a shooting at Westside Middle School and there are reports that students and teachers are wounded." She says that the station "has a crew at the scene" and expects a live report as soon as possible.

1:30 KAIT goes "live" from Westside with a report from Huddleston. He reports the multiple injuries and describes the scene. All of the victims have arrived at St. Bernards. Reporters begin to gravitate there, but don't yet know of a fortunate set of circumstances that will benefit the wounded. By sheer luck, emergency room chief Robert Beaton says later, morning surgeries are complete, the operating rooms have been cleaned and resupplied, and more than a dozen surgeons who have elective procedures scheduled for the afternoon already are in the hospital. That probably saves lives, Beaton says: Within 45 minutes of the first victim arriving at St. Bernards, all have been treated and admitted or are in operating rooms.

1:45 The nation and the world are told of the shooting in a news alert filed by the Little Rock Associated Press bureau. It says only what AP can confirm: There has been a shooting at the school and at least one person is dead.

2:00 The alert moves on AP's national wire. In Little Rock, news editor Kelly Kissel and AP staffers in the bureau have been working to confirm more facts. An AP reporter has been on the road to Jonesboro since the first report of the story.

Jonesboro. Sadler's message stack by then was 1 1/2 inches thick, reflecting 285 media calls.

Sheriff Haas was so shaken by the shootings that he broke down in tears in the early media briefing. He, too, was overwhelmed by the number of journalists.

"They set up closest to the scene (that) afternoon. ... We let them stay that night, but the next day, we encouraged them to move their equipment to the school-bus yard (across from the school) or move it here to the county jail," Haas said. "We had to assess and investigate the incident, and the media became so overwhelming that I contacted other officials ... for assistance."

Chief Johnson says Haas should have moved to control the media even sooner. "He didn't know what to do, he didn't want to offend anybody, and ... he let the media run over him, take advantage of him, trying to be nice," Johnson said. "You've got to just get tough with them."

Haas said the idea to get help with the media actually came from some of the reporters. "I asked some of them what would you do to control the situation," Haas recalled. "I think it would be safe to say that one of the older media people gave me the idea of contacting someone professional to handle them."

Early Wednesday morning, Haas asked Sadler to handle the media, and Sadler, a former television journalist who also had worked for *The Jonesboro Sun* early in his career, quickly agreed. He set up shop at the sheriff's office, which also was where Andrew Golden and Mitchell Johnson were being held.

"At that point in time, all of us knew that this was going to be a long, drawn-out affair, and it was only going to get worse



Bill Sadler, media specialist for the Arkansas State Police in Little Rock, briefs the news media.

as far as the amount of media that we were going to be dealing with," Sadler said. "My main concern was to be out there in front of those reporters and make them aware that I was available at least on an hourly basis. And if I could do that on an hourly basis, at least no one could say that we were stonewalling or that we had a closed-door mentality. I was going to get out there and try to answer every question I could answer, down to and including, 'Where are the boys right now? What's the color of the brick outside the cell? Describe the cell block for us.' That kind of thing."

Meanwhile, preparations were under way for the first judicial hearing for the suspects before juvenile court Judge Ralph Wilson. As he waited for information about when the hearing would be, Sadler began to hear rumors that the judge might allow some local media coverage of the proceeding, something that John Trout says to his knowledge had never happened before.

When Judge Wilson arrived for the hearing, Sadler asked Wilson to provide "some texture to your reasoning" to help

1:41 AP Little Rock files a "first add" to its story. The bureau is told by a secretary in the school superintendent's office that shots were fired at 12:55 p.m., between eight and 13 have been injured, all females, and that a fire alarm preceded the shots. Two of those "facts" are wrong: The secretary has the wrong time, and she does not know that a boy is among the wounded. Later updates from AP correct the errors.

1:53 As more local journalists gather at the school, students and others informally identify the two boys who have been arrested. By the next morning the names of Mitchell Johnson, 13, and Andrew Golden, 11, are broadcast worldwide. KAIT, which has a policy against using names of juveniles until they are charged as adults, verifies the identities "within an hour ... from a yearbook," but does not use them until the next morning, when the names also appear in *The Jonesboro Sun*.

2:00 Sadler works from the plane, calling "every media representative I could think of." He schedules a 4 p.m. news conference. Hundreds of media calls are coming into city and county police offices, St. Bernards and the *Sun*.

2:02 KAIT's Davis returns to the air with a live interview with Sheriff Dale Haas, who is talking with reporters for the first time.

2:30 Sadler's plane lands in Jonesboro. He goes directly to the state police headquarters for a briefing from officers there. He continues to field calls from news organizations.

answer media inquiries.

"At that point, I knew I had a friend even though he wore the robes of a judge," Sadler said. "That's when he told me, 'We have here a situation that outweighs what may have been the intent in the way the juvenile law was constructed, and I am going to allow the envelope to be stretched a little bit. I am not going to jeopardize the integrity of the case, but the public's right to know far outweighs what protection we might typically offer a juvenile in certainly a much less serious case.'"

"You understand how right-on he was," Sadler said. "If something had happened, not that it was expected to, but if there had been some question arise — Did one of the kids get a break that the other one didn't? — what better way to defend that than just opening up?"

Minutes before the hearing was to begin, Sadler also got the judge to agree to expand his definition of "local press" so more reporters would be allowed to cover the proceedings. In addition to *The Jonesboro Sun* and KAIT, an ABC affiliate in Jonesboro, Sadler arranged for reporters from Memphis and Little Rock television stations to attend, so CBS, NBC and Fox also would be represented. Reporters for the local radio station, the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* of Little Rock, *The Commercial Appeal* of Memphis, Tenn., and The Associated Press also were allowed to cover the hearing.

"I only had one national media representative look me in the eye and say, 'Any chance the national media can get in there?' and I said, 'I think we're covered,'" Sadler said. The reporter did not protest.

The media arrive

Kandra Johnson, a counselor at Charter Lakeside Behavioral Services in Jonesboro, arrived at Westside Middle School around 3:30 p.m. the day of the shootings. She was to help plan what sort of counseling should be provided for students and faculty, their relatives and friends and others in the community. It was decided that a team of counselors would come back at 6:30 p.m. and be available through the evening for anyone needing help.

When she left the school, there were a few news vans and

some local reporters in the parking lot. But when she returned at 6:30 p.m., it "looked like a midway at a fair."

"It was amazing. There were reporters mobbed [at] the front door of the school. They were being kept from going [inside], but that was it," Johnson said. "The reporters were there with bright lights, hand-held mikes, scratch pads. It just looked like something on TV."

At about 10 p.m., a family came in seeking counseling for a neighbor's boy. The couple who brought the 10-year-old in had twin boys of their own, who were with them.

"I don't think [the 10-year-old] actually saw the shootings because he was a little younger (than the victims), but he was there through all the chaos. He had been pretty emotional," Johnson recalled. "I talked to him and talked to them as a group. After we finished up, I talked to the parents for a few minutes and they walked outside. About two or three minutes later, I walked out of the gym, and the press had separated the adults from the children and they were bombarding this little child with questions."

One reporter "was attacking this little boy with questions," she said. "I understand that that's their job, and he was doing what he needed to do, but he wasn't taking into account that this child had no parents there. He (the little boy) was very scared and didn't know what was going on. They were asking him for his phone number and where he lived. I thought that was very inappropriate."

Johnson asked the mother of the twin boys "if they needed help getting them to their car, and she said yes. So I escorted them to the car with the press following us." Although the little boy probably wasn't "devastated by the experience, it was just insult to injury. They (the reporters) made you scared to talk to them."

Meanwhile, at the Arkansas State University campus in Jonesboro, a candlelight prayer vigil for the victims of the attack also was attracting its share of reporters.

"When I first got there, there were people standing around in a circle ... and the TV crews were standing right in the middle of the circle, filming their faces, kind of standing right in front of them," said Susan Light, a *Sun* reporter. "Some peo-

6:30 KAIT's Davis does a report with tape of Huddleston's earlier "live" accounts. The station is handicapped by having only one "live truck," which has left the school to go to the police briefing. Since live reports cannot be made while the truck is en route, KAIT returns to regular programming with the intention of going "live" again from the briefing. Some viewers and local pundits — particularly at the Arkansas State University campus newspaper — criticize the station for not staying with the story. Overnight, as "live trucks" arrive from sister stations and network crews supplement KAIT's 24-person newroom team, the station is able to avoid another such break in on-air reports.

6:45 KAIT does the first of four "cut in" reports from the studio, interrupting programs to update viewers with new information. The station begins to get calls from out-of-town radio stations looking for "sound bites" from Jonesboro. Calls from news organizations and from viewers will increase through the day, eventually requiring management to assign four people to answer phones.

8:00 Local reporters begin noticing the first out-of-town news staffers arriving. Curt Hodges sees news helicopters from Memphis television stations and reporters from both Memphis and Little Rock.

8:45 The first briefing begins at the Jonesboro state police office. Sadler decides that even though reporters have the names of the two youths in custody, there will not be official confirmation until police and court officials have time to study what juvenile-crime statutes apply. And he will not confirm the victims' names until some inconsistencies in early reports are settled: "We knew that the news conference would be carried 'live' and we were talking about a shooting that had happened only four hours earlier."

ple didn't care for that. Some people glared at that. There were lots of children there, and they didn't know what was going on. I think that kind of muted (the service) a little bit. People didn't feel as free to express themselves."

One person who had a bad experience with the media at the prayer vigil was Lauria Baker, who works at the Church of Christ Student Center on the ASU campus. Baker is a close friend of Suzann Wilson, and her son was a playmate of Brithney Varner. Baker and her sister took their children to the prayer vigil, and someone told a photographer that she was a friend of one of the victims.

"He just kept flashing flashes in our eyes," Baker said. "At one point, I said, that's enough, but he just kept going. We couldn't participate (in the vigil)."

Eventually, some ASU students formed a protective circle around Baker, her sister and their children so they could pray. "[Photographers] were just trying to get a prize picture of people in pain," she said.

At St. Bernards Regional Medical Center, where the dead and wounded were taken, hospital personnel set up a special briefing room for the media and began a series of regular briefings and condition updates. Family members of the victims were in a separate area, and the hospital laid down strict rules to protect the families and the patients from the media.

"The ground rules were basically, we're going to keep you updated, we're going to provide you with information as to that, but the hospital was off limits. The press were not allowed in the hospital, period," said Robert Beaton, the physician in charge of the emergency room when the victims started arriving.

Beaton knew of a few attempts by reporters to enter the hospital, including a TV crew that approached the hospital via a pedestrian bridge connected to a medical office building. But he couldn't identify the news organization involved.

The hospital's efforts, coupled with the attempts by Sadler and Sheriff Haas to provide accurate information to the media on the victims, kept misinformation to a minimum. Still, there were some errors as the story was breaking.

Some early reports said that several victims were taken to

Memphis for treatment. Beaton said he actually expected to send some victims to Memphis and had called a helicopter service for that purpose. A helicopter had landed on the roof of the Jonesboro hospital and was on alert, Beaton said, but it turned out there were enough surgeons on hand and enough operating-room capacity to handle all the cases. "It was just one of those things where one of the pieces of information was not correct ... but that's how it came about."

Mitchell Wright said he was told that a broadcast outlet reported that his wife had died in the afternoon, hours before she did. And *The Jonesboro Sun* reported on Wednesday morning that Shannon Wright was pregnant, an error that continues to surface.

"What happened there was, the surgeon called me (from the operating room) around 5 o'clock and said, 'Did you realize your wife was pregnant?' and I said I don't think so, I was not aware of that. Then he called back about 30 minutes later and said ... it was a false test (result)," Wright said.

But "the next morning it was out" that she was pregnant, Wright said. By 6:30 a.m., his answering machine picked up 25 media calls, all regarding the pregnancy angle, and those calls continued "every day until the funeral. At 6:30 in the morning, they'd start calling, and it was always the same thing. 'We're so sorry about what's happened. Our prayers are with you. Now could you tell me, was your wife pregnant?'"



David Stout, *The Jonesboro Sun*

Dr. Robert Beaton: Reporters "knew what questions I could answer ... and I thought from our standpoint, from the medical standpoint ... they did a fairly good job of getting things right."

4:00 KAIT, its truck now moved, goes live to Huddleston for details from Sadler's briefing.

5:00 KAIT's first evening news program airs. Davis leads the program with the death count and news of the arrests. The truck has moved again: A live report is made from St. Bernards Regional Medical Center.

Reporters continue to arrive in droves, now not only from regional but national news organizations. As *Jonesboro Sun* reporter Stan Mitchell later describes the hospital briefing room, "There were people just everywhere ... just swarming the hospital. The (media) room was free-flowing. You could come in and go as you wanted. And that's where the information was being given ... where they put up the huge board with names on it, and would list their conditions."

5:30 National evening network news programs begin. The killings top every newscast, with live reports from either the school or outside St. Bernards.

1:00 Network "magazine" news crews also are arriving. Quasi-news operations, such as the "Montel Williams Show," are setting up camp as well. The first international TV crews are arriving in Jonesboro.



Suzann Wilson: "The only time I ever got real upset with the press was at the funeral" of her daughter.



Paul Holmes, Sun reporter: "It seemed like every day, there were more trucks, more people, and more [microphone] stands."

Benny Baker, the minister, was at the hospital Tuesday night checking on the condition of Lynette Thetford, a Westside teacher who had been wounded. She is his son's mother-in-law. Although she was in intensive care, she was in stable condition and doctors were encouraged. But when Baker got in his truck to return to his church in Bono, he picked up a radio newscast from Chicago reporting "four students were dead, one teacher dead and another teacher not expected to live through the night." He did not note the call letters of the station.

"Now let's just say that that radio had been playing in intensive care," Baker said. "That that radio was being heard by an unconscious person, and it says that she's not supposed to live through the night." He said hearing wrong information the day of the shootings remains his most negative memory of the media's performance.

By Wednesday, even more reporters, satellite trucks and television crews were arriving. In many cases, television networks were sending teams from their evening news shows, their morning news shows, their magazine shows and their Sunday shows. Individuals who were interviewed complained that staffers from one show didn't seem to know who else was in town from the same network.

Outside the jail where Sadler held his regular briefings, where the suspects were detained and where their hearing was held, "it was a mob scene," *Sun* reporter Paul Holmes said. "It was one lane of traffic in and out of the road and finally, the Sheriff's Department had to make some effort to regulate that traffic. It became like a tent city. It seemed like every day, there were more trucks, more people, and more [microphone] stands. By the end of the week, they had little tent covers set up, to keep the sun off the reporters, I guess. I still can't grasp the enormity of it."

With so many reporters in town, it didn't take long for the "bad apples" to make their presence known.

Gretchen Woodard says she was hounded by two reporters who accosted her when she left her house, demanding to know if she was Mitchell Johnson's mother and refusing to leave when she told them she had nothing to say to them.

They hid in the yard through the night, she said, and she had to call the police at 1 a.m. and again at 3 a.m. to get them off her property. Neither the police nor Woodard knew what organization the pair worked for.

Mitchell Wright says he is convinced that photographers climbed his fence and tried to get into his yard one night while he was away. A television crew set up in the street across from his house, focusing a camera on his front door. "One of my neighbors told them if they didn't get their stuff out of the road, he was going to run over it," Wright said. "I think what most of them wanted was a picture of me and my boy together. That was the one picture they were really wanting, I think, and I wasn't going to let them have it."

After he granted the interviews to ABC and NBC about his wife's heroism, the CBS representatives in Jonesboro said that they, too, were entitled to an interview. "I said no ... and one young lady called me and said, 'You don't understand, my big boss is really going to be upset.' And I said, well surely, your big boss will understand that my little child needs me right now more than you do," Wright said.

By Thursday morning, so many complaint calls had come into Sheriff Haas' office that he took action. "We had reports of the media peeking through people's windows in neighborhoods, knocking on the door and as people open the door, walking into their living rooms with a news crew and starting to ask questions, telling them they're live on 'Action News' or ... what have you," Haas said.

"The straw that broke the camel's back was an incident involving a victim's family," Sadler said. "A mother was trying to feed her children at the breakfast table, and she looked up and there are one or two still cameras pressed up against the kitchen window. She screamed." The sheriff's office was called but "by the time [deputies] got out there, the photographers were gone. That's when the sheriff came out and read the riot act" to the media.

"We went out and talked to the press ... and explained to them what the consequences would be if they continued to misbehave," Haas said. The consequences: "They would be arrested for criminal trespassing and whatever various

8:30 At a second formal briefing, Sadler confirms the names of the victims.

Emergency-room physician Beaton later would say of the briefings: "I felt like ... most of [the reporters] were courteous and most of them asked fairly intelligent questions. ... We had obviously some patient confidentiality we couldn't breach and we tried to give them information as detailed as possible without breaching that. ... I had a couple of interviews on the side but they for the most part stayed within the ground rules. They knew what questions I could answer ... and I thought from our standpoint, from the medical standpoint ... they did a fairly good job of getting things right."

3:00 The *Sun* offices are part local newspaper, part media headquarters and part news set, as editors and reporters put out the newspaper while fielding requests for workspace, help with facts and interviews. The newspaper's deadline, midnight, is approaching all too quickly.

12:30 KAIT's late-evening newscast airs, reporting that just minutes earlier Sadler had announced the death of teacher Shannon Wright.

10:35 ABC's "Nightline" airs from KAIT. "Nightline" producers have made a decision to feature the "first reporter on the scene" as part of the program — and to feature *Sun* assistant publisher Ed Troutt from the newspaper's newsroom. (Troutt and his brother Bob had been out of town when news of the killings first broke.)

On the air, ABC's Cokie Roberts makes no mention of the "first reporter," but does interview Troutt and two others — a paramedic and a minister. No one from KAIT is interviewed.

The decision infuriates KAIT Vice President and General Manager Clyde Anderson and News Director Harvey Cox — their own network is ignoring Huddleston and KAIT's role. Like the newspaper, the station's offices and available

charges that may be put against them."

"Once it was explained, we didn't receive any more reports of misbehavior," Haas said. "It's kind of like people will run — some people, not all people — until somebody jerks the rope, and once the rope is jerked, they find themselves standing corrected. They try to see how much they can get by with or how much misbehavior will be tolerated."

Haas said he received several offers of inducements from media representatives if he would agree to an exclusive interview, and Sadler said the sheriff told him that some media outlets had offered substantial cash payments to deputies monitoring the cell block if they would take a picture of the two boys in custody. Haas would not specify how much money was offered.

"I knew that he (the sheriff) decided he wasn't going to have it, and it wasn't going to happen, and he told his people that if he caught anybody, they'd lose their job," Sadler said.

"I think the pressure from their superiors (was to blame)," Haas said. "You can look at the equipment and see there was a lot of dollars sent into this area as far as equipment and money and high-price employees, and their job is to get a story. But on some things, there's not a price."

The families

Mitchell Wright and Suzann Wilson say the first week or so after the shootings pretty much remains a blur. They and Gretchen Woodard were effectively shielded from the barrage of media calls by friends and relatives so they could grieve in private. In the case of Suzann Wilson's family, there was a little extra protection because Brithney had a different last name than her mother and stepfather, and their house is on a rural road not shown on maps.

"The only time I ever got real upset with the press was at the funeral," Suzann Wilson said. "We asked that there not be any reporters at the funeral or any cameras, and I don't think that was a problem. But when we got to the cemetery, there were just hordes of reporters and cameras. They were in the trees. They were everywhere. It was unbelievable.

"There was this one guy, and I'll never forget this picture.

We were following behind the hearse and he got right out in the middle of the road and got down on his knee ... to take a picture of that hearse. I thought to myself, how morbid. Is it really that important to get a picture of a little girl? I felt really bad when the guy stepped out in front of the hearse because that was just such an important thing to me that she not be exploited in that way. I would have gave him any pictures he wanted of her alive, but I thought this is just not the way I want my daughter on TV," she said.

Suzann Wilson said there's a lesson for the media in her experience. "If they could be more sensitive in that area," she said. "Even though people may want to see that (because of) their morbid curiosity, you've got to remember that these are victims, and that these people have been through a lot, and they've lost something very, very valuable."

"I have to be fair and say I've watched the same thing for other families," Regina Kaut, Brithney's aunt, said. "I've sat there and watched it and wanted to see it, you know? It's different when you're on the other side, and I'll always remember it from now on when I see those things."

The Wilson family and Mitchell Wright agreed, however, that some news coverage of their loved ones helped with the healing process.

"It did help," Suzann Wilson said of one particularly sensitive article about Brithney that ran in *The Jonesboro Sun*.



Bill Templeton, *The Jonesboro Sun*
Omnipresent media: Wounded Westside student Tristan McGowan, 13, is surrounded by members of the media as he is wheeled from the hospital by his grandfather, Bill McGowan.

space are filled with visiting news and production staffers and equipment. The next day, after an angry telephone conversation with top management at ABC News, KAIT and Anderson get an apology.

1:30 The press begins rolling at *The Jonesboro Sun*, about an hour behind schedule. Reporters and editors will linger until about 2:30 a.m. They plan to return to work no later than 6 a.m. They'll keep up that pace for nearly a week.

2:00 Sadler has been working nonstop, talking to authorities and fielding media inquiries, helped by two lawyers and a research specialist brought in to handle media telephone calls. Now exhausted, he goes to a nearby Holiday Inn to sleep.

5:00 Sadler is back on the job. "I began with the morning show broadcasts, with 'Today,' CBS, CNN." After those shows, he meets with Sheriff Haas and others and "that's when the sheriff started showing me his message slips and said, 'We need one person doing this,' because we already had begun to see some inconsistencies" on spellings of names and some details about the shooting and police investigation in early editions of local and regional newspapers.



Craighead County Sheriff Dale Haas told members of the news media they would be arrested if they broke any laws.

"In a sense, it made her alive for people."

The article was written by reporter Hazel Ashcraft, who had lost a daughter earlier in the year. Suzann Wilson said Ashcraft's loss made her "actually know what I was talking about."

"Once you read this article — she did this, she liked this, she liked that — it makes you realize this was a real little girl, a live, breathing child, who has now stopped at sixth grade. That brought me a lot of comfort to see that article," Brithney's mother said.

Wright also said most of the news coverage he saw was fair and handled tastefully. Asked if it was hurtful to read and see stories about his wife, he replied, "No, especially in our case. Everyone jumped on the bandwagon of going toward the heroic act. It's a lot easier to read something when someone's being portrayed as a hero versus, say, your daughter is 12 years old, and she just took a bullet in the head."

Wright offered advice to other families who may find themselves thrust into the media limelight, but even as he was giving it, he acknowledged that hard as one might try to exercise some control over the situation, the media will persist.

"If they (a family) don't want to talk, they need to issue a statement. It won't be taken seriously, but issue a statement. Then turn off the telephones and the answering machines, but you can't do that because you've got family trying to get hold of you. Now if you want to talk, or you don't mind talking, keep in mind (that) once you do one (interview), once you say one thing, then you're fair game for everyone else. You can't stop it. And just as quick as it happens, they turn it off. You turn around, and they're gone."

Gretchen Woodard had mixed success with the media. At the urging of her neighbors, who employ her husband and from whom the family rents a mobile home, she agreed to go on ABC's "20/20" shortly after the shootings. The neighbors, who know Mitchell well, told her "that somebody needed to hear my side" and that she needed to "get it out that your son is not a monster."

She says she has suffered from the repeated media appearances of her ex-husband, Scott Johnson, and his lawyer, Tom Furth, who originally was on Mitchell's case but has since

been replaced at the request of the boy and his mother. Scott Johnson had little to do with his son before the incident, Woodard said, but after the shootings, he and Furth appeared on shows such as "20/20" and "Court TV." Among the things they said is that Mitchell was abused as a youth, something Woodard said she did not know. That revelation prompted her to place a protest call to Barbara Walters and won her an apology and some flowers from Walters.

"She apologized. She said I thought this was done with your blessing," Woodard said. "She said, maybe the next time you feel harshly about a journalist or reporter, remember me."

"Mrs. Woodard was very [reluctant] dealing with reporters, but I told her most reporters would respect the terrible time she was going through," Walters said. "She also gave me specific statements to use exclusively on '20/20.' I was very touched by her, and I sent her a small bouquet of flowers."

Woodard has had a better experience with the national media than with the local media. She is angry with *The Jonesboro Sun* and the local television station, KAIT, for stories about her son suggesting that he was a troublemaker who boasted of being a gang member and who may have targeted specific classmates. Not once, she said, has the *Sun* or KAIT contacted her to ask about the negative material about her son before using it. She suspects there may be an effort to take attention off the younger suspect, whose family has lived in the Jonesboro area a long time, by putting more blame on her son and her family. They moved to the area from Minnesota about three years ago.

"KAIT could have at least called [before] putting all the negative on — and they've been wonderful at that," Woodard said. "And the newspaper also. For God's sake, if you're going to print something that are lies or show something that is blatant lies, it hurts me."

Although Woodard said she was not interested in giving long interviews, she would have been available to correct the record. "Absolutely, and I've done that many times," she said. "WCCO (a Minneapolis station) ... called and wanted to talk, and I did. That's why I feel the distance. I don't know why *The Jonesboro Sun* chose to do it the way they did. They're real

Summary Local, national and international journalists and TV news crews have flocked to the parking lot of Westside Middle School. An estimated 50 satellite trucks and camera crews await arriving staff, counselors and police investigators.

Summary Students, parents and others are coming to Westside to talk with counselors assembled in the building. Some are escorted past dozens of TV cameras by police. School officials, alarmed at what one official calls "hordes" of media chasing after visitors at the school, decide to ban reporters and camera crews from school property.

Recognizing that TV correspondents will want a "visual" of the school in the background for their reports, Sadler and other officials arrange for the media trucks and crews to move to an area across the road in the school-bus parking lot. From that location, the school buildings are visible over correspondents' shoulders as they face cameras.

Summary It is almost 24 hours since the shootings. News operations worldwide either are in Jonesboro or doing interviews by telephone, with any officials they can find. Some sheriff's deputies report they have been approached with offers of money for news or photos of the two youths being held in the county jail, though those news organizations and the amounts of money offered are not specified.

Sadler has begun a series of hourly news briefings. He and others are concerned that too many rumors — from Shannon Wright's supposed pregnancy to the types of weapons involved in the attack — are flying.

Network news staffs and the network magazine programs are busy preparing for the "second night" newscasts, lining up family members and others to be interviewed.

good at throwing accusations."

Troutt did not speak directly to the newspaper's failure to interview Woodard, but he made pointed comments when asked if the community had pulled away from the shooters' families.

"I don't know if they've pulled away from the Goldens. The other family, the community didn't know. They came in from elsewhere. The boy spent time in Minnesota, and heaven knows where the woman (Woodard) spent time," Troutt said.

He said the Golden family was "well known" in the community. "The grandfather manages the Bayou de View hunting preserve ... and he's well known. The father, I'm not sure what he does ... The mother is a postal employee at Walnut Ridge. They are a family," Troutt said.

The newspaper

Woodard's complaints notwithstanding, *The Jonesboro Sun* won wide praise from area residents for the consideration it showed to the victims and their families, its accuracy and the absence of sensationalism in its coverage of the shootings. "I thank them for being a role model for the other media," Kandra Johnson, the counselor, said.

"Our paper's that way," Sheriff Haas said. "We have a relationship where we can sit down and communicate with each other honestly. And they are all good neighbors, and when one of us hurts, they tend to hurt right along with us because we're a tight-knit community."

For all the national media that descended on the community, there was not a single story broken that *The Jonesboro Sun* did not have. "I think we owned the story," Troutt said.

"Even the news that they did break we turned down." For example, he said, "we refused to run the picture of the little Golden boy with a gun. We didn't think it was appropriate. That reinforced to me the stereotype that a lot of the national and international media tried to put on (the story) — the Southern gun culture, Bubba with the chewing tobacco and

gun and all that sort of thing. And that's not true," Troutt said.

Troutt said the newspaper has received not a single call criticizing its coverage. The only suggestion that the newspaper may have been out of line came from Mitchell Wright, who objected to the fact that the newspaper sold its photographs to Sygma, a distribution company. Troutt said that was done so the newspaper would not be besieged with requests from magazines, overseas news organizations and others seeking photos.

"(He) heard rumors that we sold the pictures and made big money. We have told him that we got \$12,500 for the things we shot," Troutt said. "But the company took not one dime of it. We split it among the staff."

As important to the community as the *Sun's* coverage was, the respect the newspaper holds in the community and its commitment to educating its readers on the ways of the media also played a crucial role in minimizing the potential for a media disaster when the story broke.

From government officials to average readers, there exists in Jonesboro a great understanding of the role of the media, the importance of getting information out to the public and the difficulties that reporters face. "I credit that to John Troutt," Sadler, the media specialist for the state police, said. "There is tremendous trust in that paper."

"If there is anything I can get violent about, it's freedom of information and the right of the press and the public to know what's going on," Troutt said. "Everybody around here knows that if they try to hide something, we are going to court. ... [*The Sun*] will sue just about every time somebody tries to keep public information secret."

Troutt said it also is important that the newspaper carry a lot of stories about the media, their role and the way they work. "The press is very important. That makes what it does — good and bad — legitimate news."

Talk show producer eludes security, enters hospital room

About four or five days after the shootings, wounded teacher Lynette Thetford was recovering in her hospital room at the St. Bernards Regional Medical Center when she received an unexpected visitor.

"A lady from the 'Montel Williams Show' came to the hospital room with a student, Emma Pittman," said Thetford's husband, Carroll. Emma Pittman was the student whose life had been saved by another teacher, Shannon Wright, who was fatally wounded.

"She identified herself as working for the 'Montel Williams Show' and she stayed for probably 30 minutes or so," Carroll Thetford said. "At the end, she said she wanted Emma Pittman and Christine Amer (another student) to go on the 'Montel Williams Show,' and she asked my wife if she'd call the Amers to see if they would let the two go with her to New York. Of course, we weren't going to do that."

At the time of the visit, the hospital was off limits to the media.

"I think [the woman] said she was a little bit related to Emma" to gain entry, Carroll Thetford said. She came alone, without a camera crew. The suggestion that Mrs. Thetford might intercede with the Amers did not come until the producer had been in the room nearly a half hour. "I think she was trying to use us," he said.

Lynette Thetford was wounded protecting one of her students from gunfire. Christina Amer later told reporters that she was that student.

When the producer's request was refused, she left, Carroll Thetford said. "If she had stayed any longer, we would have told her to leave."

A receptionist for the "Montel Williams Show" in New York identified Suzanne Bass as the producer who was in Jonesboro for the program. "I really cannot speak with you about anything. I can't speak to you," Bass said when asked about the hospital incident. "I did my job, and I'm not going to say anything more."

— Cheryl Arvidson

Identification of minor suspects trickles out

Decision often influenced by what other news outlets did

While *The New York Times* was the first among major news organizations to identify the Jonesboro shooting suspects, it was not alone. *The Jonesboro Sun* published the boys' names and photos the same day. Local television station KAIT also identified them on March 25.

Many news organizations have a policy of not identifying minors in juvenile crime reports. But exceptions are made and decisions often can be influenced by what other members of the news media do. Among those responding to a survey about identifying the Jonesboro suspects, many acknowledged that a factor in their decision was that other news organizations already had identified the boys. The responses, with the date and/or time (EST) of identification in parentheses:

"Bill Keller, managing editor of The New York Times, said that he made the decision to print the names in Wednesday's issue (March 25) in about five minutes. He said the call was unusually easy because so many people had seen the crime, because most people in Jonesboro knew the suspects' identities, and because exploring the suspects' backgrounds was an important part of understanding the story."

— from a story by Mike Allen in *The New York Times*, March 27, 1998

The New York Times (March 25)

Why: "Our policy with respect to juveniles is to be very cautious and to talk about it. ... We're in the publishing business. To my mind, the burden of argument is on those who say, 'Don't publish.'"

— Bill Keller, managing editor (from story quoted at left)

The Associated Press (March 25, 8:09 a.m.)

Why: "We have no blanket rule against identifying juvenile suspects. Our policy is to follow local law and where not prohibited, weigh each case to determine, among other considerations: Are the identifications important for news purposes? Have the identifications been confirmed? Have the identifications already been widely disseminated in the community?"

— Tori Smith, corporate communications

Star Tribune, Minneapolis (March 25)

Why: "When adolescents commit heinous crimes such as murder, the accountability must be there."

— Tim J. McGuire, editor

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette (March 26)

Why: "Our general policy is not to publish names of minors. However, given the heinousness of the crime and the fact that their names had already been reported in the national media, we felt we could no longer protect their anonymity."

— Bob Lutgen, spokesman

The Commercial Appeal, Memphis, Tenn. (March 26)

Why: "Our policy is to print the names of minors who commit serious adult crimes, unless there is a compelling reason not to, but we do so only after they have been officially charged by a law enforcement agency."

— Charles Bernson, metro editor

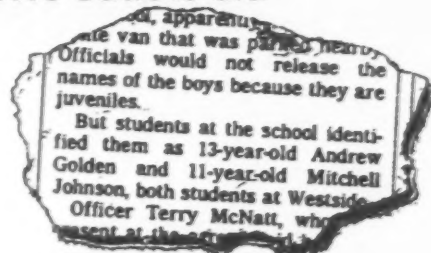
USA TODAY (March 26)

Why: "We decided we would use the names of the boys if they were formally accused of the shootings. On the 24th, the police did not identify them and they were not arraigned. ... On the 25th, the boys were arraigned. We printed the names on the 26th."

— Dave Mazzarella, editor

The Washington Post (March 26)

Why: "[The Post] decided to identify the Jonesboro boys because their names and photographs were published in



From *The New York Times*, March 25. Note that the ages of the suspects are transposed.

their hometown paper and in many other newspapers around the country, and were broadcast by the major television networks."

— From a story March 26 in *The Washington Post*

The Sacramento Bee (March 29)

Why: "We have [a] rule — but it's not set in concrete — that we do not name juveniles until they are adjudicated as adults. It was a tough decision, but in this case, when the father of Mitchell Johnson went on television and talked to the newspapers ... it was very difficult not to identify his son. At that stage we decided we would go ahead. I'm not sure it was the right decision. When you have a policy you really should live by it as closely as you possibly can or it really doesn't mean anything."

— Gregory Favre, executive editor

ABC (March 25, 7 a.m.)

Why: "ABC chooses to release the names of minors accused of crimes on a case-by-case basis. In [this] case ABC released the names after relatives of the suspects made statements to the press."

— Eileen Murphy, director of public relations

CBS (March 25, 7 a.m.)

Why: "Usually, CBS News does not identify minors allegedly involved in crimes. In this case, however, the boys had been identified by other news outlets, including their hometown newspaper, by the time we were to go on the air."

— Sandra M. Genolius, communications director

NBC (March 25, 6:30 p.m.)

Why: "It is customary for NBC News not to identify minors who are suspects in a crime. We made an exception because there were compelling reasons, i.e., the boys had been identified by numerous other media outlets and relatives had made statements to the press."

— Barbara Levin, director of communications

CNN (March 25, 8 p.m.)

Why: "CNN chose to formally air the names of the juvenile suspects in a scheduled newscast after reports by numerous other news organizations. Also, the suspects' names had been used during live press briefings by police and other officials that were aired on CNN."

— Andy Mitchell, CNN spokesman

Sun's editor sets the tone for coverage: Consider 'everybody in Jonesboro' a victim

BY ROBERT J. HAIMAN

When several hundred Jonesboro residents gathered April 13 to offer their perceptions of media performance following the tragedy that had struck their small city 21 days earlier, we heard something we had not expected to hear:

The people of Jonesboro were overwhelmingly complimentary of the way *The Jonesboro Sun* had covered the story. In this time of criticism of the news media, this just doesn't happen much — and certainly not when the coverage being praised was of a horrendous shooting that left four local children and a teacher dead, 10 children wounded, two of their fellow students charged with hitting them with rifle fire, and the entire city traumatized.

At the same time, the citizens had many complaints about the way the national and international media had covered the story. Intrigued, we wanted to find out why the *Sun* was so widely praised and the out-of-town media scorned. The Freedom Forum read and analyzed the newspapers published by the *Sun* in the 21 days after the incident. We examined every page, studied every headline and photo, and read every line of copy.

The bottom line

The *Sun* covered the story unblinkingly, in the best journalistic sense of that word. Its coverage not only was thorough and fair but a virtual model of how a small news staff can roll into a major breaking story and cover it with accuracy, balance, completeness and detachment. Moreover, the *Sun* news team not only achieved that on the first day, it maintained cruising speed for the next 20 days.

Even more impressive, it did it in a way that not only fully informed readers — shielding them from none of the details of the event — but that also helped the community deal with its grief and slowly begin to heal itself.

To accomplish that would be a worthy challenge for a staff of 100 or more. But the entire *Jonesboro Sun* news staff comprises 16 reporters and editors, three photographers, four sports staffers plus some part-time students and two society reporters. How this small staff in a sparsely populated corner of Arkansas managed to do this is a story that is not only commendable for Jonesboro. It also can be instructive for all who care about doing the job right.

The story begins with the *Sun*'s remarkable leader, John W. Troutt Jr. At 68, Troutt is editor, publisher, chief executive officer and owner. He presides over a newspaper that has grown from a circulation of 7,500 when he started working for his father and uncle in 1954 to 28,000 daily and 31,000 on

Sunday. It dominates its market in the fifth-largest city in the state and obviously is profitable. At this stage of life, many owners of small-city newspapers would be easing toward retirement and thinking about spending more time on the golf course.

Not John Troutt. Two nights a week, the tall, soft-spoken Arkansan schedules himself into the "night slot," where he puts out the newspaper. He reads all of the copy, dummies all of the pages, writes all of the headlines and stays until the newspaper goes to press at midnight. Why would he do that? "Well, I want to stay in touch with the night staff," he says, "but the real truth is that news is what I like to do." He also writes all of the editorials.

Troutt was in New Mexico on March 24 when the shooting began at Westside Middle School in the community of Bono, a 10-minute drive from downtown Jonesboro. Directing coverage of the story fell to the *Sun*'s two associate editors, Larry Fugate and Mike Overall, both of whom have worked for Troutt for about 30 years. They seem to know his mind even when he is not speaking. It was Fugate and Overall who organized the coverage. In the next 10 hours, the staff generated eight full pages of exemplary stories and photos.

Troutt cut short his Santa Fe vacation and flew home. For the next

week he, Fugate, Overall and their staff worked 18 hours a day covering a story that attracted the attention of the national and international media but that, for them, was all-consuming local.

Troutt almost never gives orders; it's not his leadership style. But on this day he made a news policy decision. He told the staff: "This is a shooting story and so it has a cops-and-shooters aspect to it. But the victims are not just the 15 people who were shot. Everybody — not just the people who were hit by the bullets — is in pain. ... The victims are the entire community ... and we are going to focus our coverage on the victims. We are going to cover the two shooters, too, and thoroughly ... but we are going to maximize our coverage of the victims, because that's everybody in Jonesboro."

He also reminded them of the only policy he's ever articulated for the news staff of the *Sun*: "Do it right."

On that first day, Overall was working and Fugate was scheduled to be off. (They have equal authority and one or the other is in charge each day.) When the story broke, Overall was at lunch. "So," Fugate said, "one of the sports guys ran over to the news desk and took charge until Overall returned." Fugate, called at home, went to the school and organized the coverage there.

“
The victims are not just the
15 people who were shot.
Everybody ... is in pain.
”

— John W. Troutt Jr.,
editor, *The Jonesboro Sun*

Robert J. Haiman, a Freedom Forum senior fellow and one of several Freedom Forum representatives who monitored comments at a Jonesboro forum about media coverage of the shootings, subsequently analyzed the work of *The Jonesboro Sun*. From 1983-1997, Haiman was president of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies in St. Petersburg, Fla. He worked 25 years at the *St. Petersburg (Fla.) Times*, rising to the position of executive editor, and is a past president of the Associated Press Managing Editors.



John W. Troutt Jr., editor, publisher, chief executive officer and owner of *The Jonesboro Sun*, still runs the newspaper at 68: "The real truth is that news is what I like to do."

An early problem to be solved was how to handle the dozens of out-of-town journalists descending on the town, including TV crews from as far away as Japan. Equally challenging were the hundreds of journalists calling the newspaper from around the world, looking for updates, contacts, background and sound bites.

Troutt decided to put his two sons — assistant publishers Bob, 39, and Ed, 36 — in charge of all of the out-of-town journalists. (Bob and Ed have journalism degrees, are part-owners of the newspaper and have business interests outside the newspaper.) They handled hundreds of phone calls and e-mail messages, dealt with the scores of visiting press, and freed their father and the news staff to work on the story.

How and what did *The Jonesboro Sun* staff members do and how well did they do it? Here is a thumbnail analysis of the crucial first eight days of the story, beginning with the day after the shootings and continuing through the charging of the two suspects, the funeral services, and ending with the communitywide memorial service.

March 25 First day after the shootings

Banner headline: "Snipers rain death, terror at Westside." Two stories drop out of it, headed: "Four youths, teacher die; 10 more hit" and "Young pair in custody."

The lead story is written in graceful narrative, not inverted pyramid style, acknowledging that virtually everyone in Jonesboro already had learned of the basic facts on TV and radio. It begins "Slaughter on the school yard: before Terrible Tuesday, parents, educators and even policemen wanted to believe it couldn't happen here." After giving the basic facts of the dead and wounded, it goes on to say, "To make the tragedy even more horrific, police sources say they believe the two camouflage-clad shooters are two Westside students, Andrew Golden and Mitchell Johnson, boys aged 11 and 13."

SPORTS
Advance tickets now
back in Print Post

LOCAL/STATE
Standard coverage
State & local news

MEMBERSHIP
Subscription rates
Single copies 25¢

The Jonesboro Sun

PORTLAND, OREGON, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 25, 1998

Westside Shooting

President calls mayor from plane

Young pair in custody

Four youths, teacher die; 10 more hit

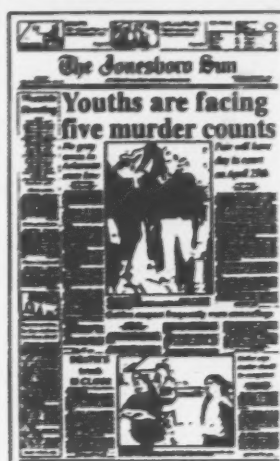
Fire alarm sounds before hall of deadly gunfire

FOUR STUDENTS, TEACHER DIE IN BARRAGE

The *Jonesboro Sun's* first day of coverage, March 25, included the impact of the shootings on the community, as well information on the crime itself.

The other top story recounts that one of the boys arrested had told fellow students the day before that they would soon learn if they would live or die, but his threat had been discounted. A third story on the bottom says the boys tripped a fire alarm that drew the students and teachers outdoors into the schoolyard to be shot. Page 3A is dominated by a 33-inch story of the major efforts immediately under way to counsel the shocked and grieving and begin the healing process. Several other stories inside the A section and on Page 1B and inside the B section cover in detail the grief of families and citizens, vigils being maintained for the critically wounded,

Thursday, March 26



Friday, March 27



Saturday, March 28



prayers being offered, calls and letters of sympathy, and plans for additional and expanded counseling programs. It's important to note that even on that first day, when it was easy and tempting to over-focus on the violent acts of perpetrators and their specific victims, the *Sun* expended large amounts of time and space reporting on what was going on in the overall community, as well as on the crime.

The community could see itself — not just the shooters and their targets — broadly reflected in the coverage, and that almost certainly led to its positive response to the newspaper's performance.

At the same time, the *Sun* did not back away from the grim details of the crime and its victims, or shield its readers from the horrors.

The Page One color photo is of a grieving girl in a bloody shirt being comforted in the arms of a teacher. There are two color photos inside of wounded students being rushed away on gurneys, and one — eight columns wide — of a dead student in a body bag being wheeled to an ambulance. There are other photos of grieving students crying on the shoulders of adults, badly shaken police officers with their heads in their hands, a deputy standing on the bloody sidewalk where the students were shot and fell, and close-ups of adults sobbing at a vigil for the wounded.

Those are the kinds of photos that sometimes anger readers as being intrusive and gratuitous. But our conclusion is that the citizens of Jonesboro were not offended by them because they were in the overall context of sympathetic and extensive coverage of the feelings of the shocked community, that larger group of "victims" that John Troutt had defined for his staff. Moreover, the 36-page newspaper (increased eight pages for the shooting story) also has three pages of other local news, three pages of national news, two pages of foreign news, a page of state news, five sports pages, two business/financial pages, a women's page, and the usual comics, entertainment and listings.

March 26

The lead story and headline are about the two suspects and

the charges they may face. The story explains the complex legal process under way. A sidebar makes it clear that under Arkansas law the boys cannot be charged or tried as adults. They cannot face the death penalty. There also are stories quoting legislators urging changes in that law. But most of the other major stories in the newspaper are about the shock and agony of the community, the memorial services, the grief-counseling efforts, the messages of condolence from around the world, praise for the heroic teacher who died protecting a student, the white bows and ribbons of remembrance appearing everywhere, the flags flying at half-staff, the banks and other local businesses taking up collections for the victims' families, the waitresses and beauticians donating all of their tips.

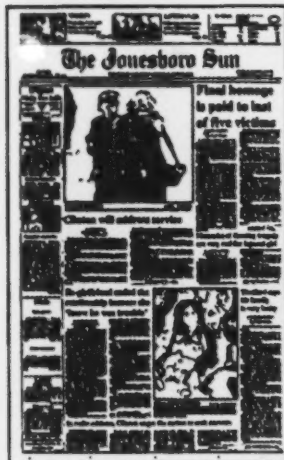
Those are the bits of news that, in some other cities, might end up as single paragraphs in a long general story. But the *Sun* chose to report and write about each in detail and at length, to make each a separate story and display it prominently with a large headline. Again: The newspaper was reflecting the lives of its readers, reporting on what they were saying, feeling and doing as they tried to cope. Readers today would learn not just what the police were saying about the suspects and not just what the doctors were saying about the wounded, which is typical of second-day crime coverage, but what the community was saying about itself. It is a textbook example of the best kind of community journalism.

Troutt's first editorial on the tragedy appears today. It is about how the unthinkable had happened in Jonesboro. It notes that there will be plenty of time later to affix blame; that undoubtedly psychological answers will be offered. But it focuses principally on the pain the city is feeling and how it is responding. The headline: "We All Hurt."

March 27

The lead stories are on the developing police investigation, details of the arsenal used by the shooters, and transcripts of the chilling 911 police tapes of the first reports. But there also are stories about the encouraging progress of the wounded, more details of the community rallying, plans for the com-

[Sunday, March 29]



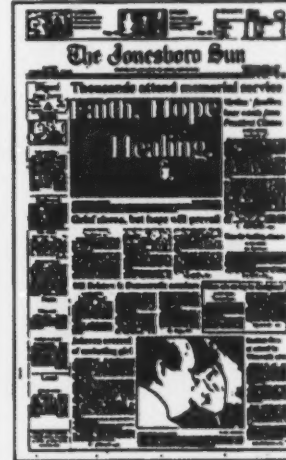
[Monday, March 30]



[Tuesday, March 31]



[Wednesday, April 1]



munitywide memorial and healing service, the full text of the governor's support message and the spread of the white bows and ribbons. One story tells how sometimes competitive police agencies had cooperated. Others, without fawning, describe how smoothly the three ambulance services had coordinated and how well the local hospital and its doctors and nurses had performed. One inside story lists more than 20 bake sales, suppers, fish fries, auctions, raffles, songfests and other similar events being planned or held to benefit the victims. Each is fully detailed. Some might question the legitimacy of giving substantial space to such minor events. But, individually and collectively, this is the story of what the people of Jonesboro were doing as they went about coping and there is little doubt that they thought it was newsworthy. There also is a detailed story reporting that most students were going back to Westside and that efforts were under way to return the school to a normal schedule as soon as possible.

Trout's second editorial, headlined "Humanity" and reflecting on the hundreds of messages of sympathy pouring into Jonesboro, appears today. It describes how the shootings, tragic as they were, had connected the world to Jonesboro and demonstrated how interrelated we all are. There also is a half-page of letters on the shootings, most of them expressing shock, grief and sympathy.

March 28

The lead story describes the funeral of two girls. It runs for more than 40 inches, quotes the minister's remarks extensively, and is accompanied by two poignant photos of mourners.

The newspaper also publishes detailed, separate obituaries on each

girl. Other stories include coverage of the continuing police investigation, interviews with newly discovered witnesses; clarification that police were sure no other shooters were involved, updates on the wounded, more on tributes and memorials, and details on the work of the more than 100 social workers engaged in the counseling effort.

There also is the first story of resident complaints of frenzied, aggressive and intrusive behavior by some outside journalists. Trout's editorial is headlined "Changed." It ends: "Jonesboro and Craighead County are wonderful places inhabited by some of the finest people to be found anywhere. But there are those among us who are troubled and have severe personal problems. We can help by listening and lending a helping hand. If we have learned anything from this horrible tragedy, it is that we must be kind to each other."

March 29

The lead story is on the funerals of the other two girls and the teacher who was killed. The banner headline says, "Final homage is paid to last of five victims." There are extensive quotes from the ministers' remarks, the psalms read and the hymns sung, and several large color photos of grieving mourners. Other stories: The ex-girlfriend, 11, of one of the suspects is interviewed on how she stopped being his girlfriend after only three days because she "knew he was trouble." President Clinton's radio address is about seeking answers to the shooting. Clinton will address the "Service for Hope and Healing" scheduled for next Tuesday. Interviews with recovering students and the husband of a seriously wounded teacher are featured. A Page 1B guest column by a Little Rock TV journalist is headlined "Sadness in city is incredible." The editorial headline is "Responding."

March 30

The lead story explains the Arkansas juvenile-law system and how it will determine the fate of the two suspects. A lengthy sidebar details the daily routine of the boys in the juvenile detention center, their schedule, their meals, their

Continued on page 20

“As bad as some of the press was in this whole thing, I also have to say that I think the press had a very positive part in it because we have received tons of mail from school children ... writing because they were sad and they were scared. And who knows how many children it may have made stop and think about it.”

— Suzann Wilson,
mother of slain victim Britthney Varner, 11

The Sun passes a test of fairness

To help gauge media fairness, a five-part formula may be helpful: accuracy + balance + completeness + detachment + ethics = fairness, or A+B+C+D+E=F. Applying this guideline to *The Jonesboro Sun*, here is how its coverage of the Westside Middle School compares.

ACCURACY: The coverage — at least for the 21 days of newspapers examined — was a model of accuracy. Only three errors of fact could be found. One was an early report that the two boys in custody were cousins. They are not and that was prominently corrected as soon as the newspaper discovered it was wrong. A second was an initial report that slain teacher Shannon Wright was pregnant, which she was not. That was clarified in a news story the following day. The third had to do with what police found in the van that had been stolen on the morning of the shootings. A first report said that in addition to the 10 weapons the boys had on or near them when arrested, others had been found in the van. That was not correct; there was additional ammunition in the van but no firearms. It appears the error actually was based on incorrect information released by a police source. The *Sun* corrected the record.

BALANCE: The *Sun's* attempt to give a fully balanced report — thorough on the details of the crime, fair to the accused — was obvious from the first day. Reporters appear to have been scrupulous in attributing to named sources everything they had not personally witnessed. The language of stories was not timid, but it was restrained. One reporter quoted a witness as saying "It looked like Beirut," but no such sweeping statements or florid metaphors were used by the journalists. A chief deputy used the word "ambush," but the reporter did not exploit it. Instead he used the deputy's full quote, which put the word in context.

The *Sun* was careful with unsubstantiated allegations, using language such as "It has been widely reported that students saw [a suspect] pull the fire alarm and then run out of the school building but police have not publicly confirmed that scenario." The only example of hyped or overripe language found was in a story on March 28 that described the boys in custody as "now considered to be the most infamous schoolyard

mass murderers in the United States."

Reporters interviewed many neighbors of the two suspects to learn more about them. An obvious effort was made to get quotes both from people who liked the boys and those who did not think so well of them. The result was a fair and balanced report with descriptions ranging from "polite boy" to "typical kid" to "rowdy kid" to "extremely hyperactive" to "troubled psychopath." As a picture began to emerge that one of the boys came from a troubled family, the newspaper also reported that the boy's stepfather had been a hero 25 years earlier when a school bus had crashed into a ravine and he had saved the lives of several fellow students. But Gretchen Woodard, mother of suspect Mitchell Johnson, said in an interview that the *Sun* didn't contact her to ask about negative characterizations of her son's behavior before they were printed. "For God's sake, if you're going to print something that are lies ... it hurts me. ... I don't know why *The Jonesboro Sun* chose to do it the way they did. They're real good at throwing accusations."

COMPLETENESS: The coverage was so voluminous it is difficult to imagine that anything of significance could have been omitted. There was a strong complaint from one reader — an Arkansas State University professor who had a daughter at Westside — that the newspaper had failed to report a potential aspect of the story. The professor said that it was not a coincidence that 14 of the 15 people struck by bullets and all five of those killed were females. The *Sun* staff said neither they nor police could find any evidence to support that view, although the newspaper could have reported the professor's theory and let the public decide its merits. There was no evidence that the newspaper made any effort to try to interview the suspects in jail, although their daily routines in confinement were reported regularly. Nor do we know from reading the newspaper whether the judge would have allowed such interviews.

Looking for angles possibly missed, The Freedom Forum examined Associated Press reports and *Time* and *Newsweek* issues dated April 6, 13 days after the shootings, and found no glaring holes in the *Sun's* coverage. The national magazines devoted much more space in their coverage to the issues of gun control and availability than the *Sun* did. The *Sun* did

relatively little staff reporting of the incident as having anything to do with the gun-control issue but did publish several state and national AP stories on the subject. Some might argue that the *Sun* could have done more on that aspect of the story. But perhaps that's a difference of perspective on the general issue of guns between journalists who live in New York City and journalists who live in semi-rural Arkansas.

DETACHMENT: This is probably the most difficult part of the formula against which to measure the performance of the *Sun*. To the extent that "detachment" means a nonaligned, unbiased effort to be fair to all sides and parties, the *Sun* gets high marks. To the extent that "detachment" means a complete, almost total arm's-length lack of interest in the effects of what gets published, the *Sun* itself probably would acknowledge that it did not fully measure up.

Editor John Troutt Jr. had made it plain that he wanted the newspaper to report thoroughly on the process of healing in the community. The evidence is clear that the staff followed his instruction without omitting other important aspects of the story. The *Sun's* coverage might well serve as a case study for both advocates and critics of the public/community/civic journalism movement.

ETHICS: All of the evidence indicates that *Sun* reporters behaved ethically while pursuing the story aggressively. They pressed hard for the news but also respected the privacy of victims. Although the first reporters and photographers arrived at the school when some of the dead and wounded were still on the ground, they respected police lines, did not interfere with the work of emergency personnel, and took no close-up photographs of personal agonies.

There are no reports of *Sun* cameras being shoved in anyone's face. No telephoto lenses reached into private homes. When some out-of-town journalists swarmed around shocked students coming out of grief counseling to rejoin their parents, *Sun* reporters did not join the swarm. Headlines, captions and text avoided inflammatory or sensational images, and the ethical issues such language suggests. The *Sun* did not pay or offer to pay for any exclusive access or material, nor did it agree to grant any requests to withhold anything from the newspaper.

A + B + C + D + E = F

Continued from page 18

contacts with their lawyers and families, their fears and apprehensions. The newspaper staffed Sunday services at several churches and reported extensively on what the ministers were saying to their congregations about forgiveness and healing, and about the few angry voices in the city starting to call for the boys to be tried as adults and to face adult punishment if found guilty. At one Catholic church, young girls handed, without explaining, a small stone to each person entering. The minister began his sermon by saying, "Now, let those without sin cast the first stone." The *Sun* staff, by now exhausted after five consecutive 18-hour days, probably would have welcomed a chance to sleep in that Sunday morning. But they were out and about their town covering church services and, again, they were reporting the story closest to the hearts and minds of their readers.

March 31

The top of Page One is taken up by five color photos of the four girls and one teacher killed in the shooting. There is an overall heading saying "Five Precious Memories." Under each photo is the lead of a staff story recounting the life of that person. Each of the stories jumps at least a full column and includes detailed quotes of remembrance from mothers, fathers, friends and teachers and, in the case of teacher Shannon Wright, a husband. Second play goes to an advance on the communitywide "Service for Hope and Healing" that night. Other Page One stories are about the continuing police investigation and a court administrator saying juvenile judges need more options in dealing with young children who commit major crimes. There are six teasers to related inside stories. Page 1B is devoted almost entirely to the school. The banner at the top says "Westside students back on campus" and details in 25 inches the way in which counseling efforts have students not only back in school but functioning almost normally. One story explains the best ways (with a detailed street map) to get through expected heavy traffic to the service that evening. Another gives the minute-by-minute sched-

ule: who will speak, who will sing and the names of the hymns.

Troutt's editorial suggests attendance at the healing service, cautions against calls for vengeance and is headlined "Healing."

April 1

Nearly 8,000 people — one of every six residents of Jonesboro — turned out for the "Service for Hope and Healing" at the convocation center at Arkansas State University and the *Sun* devotes most of pages 1A and 1B to several stories and photographs about the event, with lengthy jumps. Attorney General Janet Reno spoke and President Clinton appeared on videotape. The families of the five people killed attended. Many ministers spoke, choirs sang, stuffed animals were passed out to children, and everyone got a white ribbon of remembrance. The stories are written in ways that reflect the power and emotion of the evening while avoiding maudlin language.

Succeeding days

The *Sun* continues to publish daily as much as a half-page of letters from readers still wanting to talk about the shootings, as it had virtually every day since Day One. But other national, state and local news stories have retaken the front pages. It's said that a mark of good editors and their staffs is knowing when to pull out all of the stops on a huge story, and also knowing when to get the story off the front page.

In the movie "Absence of Malice," there is a scene in which a crusty city editor tries to comfort a young reporter who wrote a story that resulted in a woman's suicide. The editor, maintaining that the story was legitimate and should have been published despite the consequences, says to the distraught reporter, "I know how to print what's true. And I know how not to hurt people. But I don't know how to do both at the same time."

That editor could have learned a lesson from *The Jonesboro Sun*. In covering the tragedy at Westside Middle School, John Troutt, Mike Overall, Larry Fugate and the staff of the *Sun* demonstrated how it can, and should, be done.

Print media get high marks for coverage but fall short giving 'meaning' to tragedy

BY LAWRENCE T. MCGILL

Both the strengths and weaknesses of national and regional print media were on display in their coverage of the Westside Middle School shootings. When they stuck to reporting, they were at their best. When they tried to make meaning out of the tragedy, with one notable exception, they came up short.

In particular, the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* provided exceptionally thorough and thoughtful reporting. It clearly recognized that there was a strong need for those closest to the story to come to grips with its impact on all aspects of the community. The newspaper's extensive coverage showed how vital a role the news media can play in the process of grieving and community maintenance when tragedy strikes.

At the national level, *The New York Times*, *Time* and *Newsweek* provided both detailed coverage and restrained analysis of the shootings. *USA TODAY* and *U.S. News & World Report*, though, fell victim to the malady that afflicted many news organizations in the wake of the incident, namely, the urge to speculate uninformedly on the larger social "causes" of school violence. It is not difficult to understand how the manner in which those publications invoked the notion of "a Southern culture of guns and violence" could have been interpreted as media unfairness.

The New York Times demonstrated the greatest facility in relating (and more important, showing the lack of relationship between) sociological statistics and the Jonesboro story. *Newsweek* and *Time* were no less eager than the other publications to pursue the "why" angle to the story, but they knew to pull back when their analyses began to get speculative. Each showed sound sociological and journalistic instincts in turning their focus back to the specifics of the other school shootings that had preceded Jonesboro, rather than groping for vague generalizations to explain what, to all appearances, seemed to be shaping up as a trend in school violence.

Certainly there is a need to make meaning out of events like these, and the news media are not to be faulted for attempting to do so. But few reporters have the tools necessary to carry off a coherent analysis of sociological data and trends, especially within 24 hours of an event like this. Instead, the place to ask "why" (and all the newspapers used this avenue very effectively) was on the editorial page. Here the newspapers raised the inevitable questions that must be raised when tragedies occur. But they didn't force answers to those questions. It was enough that they were raised.

March 25 First day after the shootings

Jonesboro was the lead story on Page One in both the national newspapers (*The New York Times* and *USA TODAY*) and the regional newspapers (the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* in Little Rock and *The Commercial Appeal* in

Wednesday, March 25



Memphis, Tenn.). All four headlines agreed on the facts of the incident — five were dead in a schoolyard shooting; the suspects were two schoolboys.

Both *The New York Times* and *USA TODAY* featured front-page photos of gurneys being wheeled away from Westside Middle School. The *Times* showed officials removing the body of a dead girl; *USA TODAY* showed rescue personnel rushing an injured victim to an ambulance. Photos of the dead victims found their way into all four newspapers.

But beyond the headlines and heartrending photographs, coverage of the tragedy diverged considerably across the newspapers in both scope and level of detail.

In both of the national newspapers, the coverage was confined to a single story on the front page, with one or two related stories on an inside page. *USA TODAY* ran a story on the devastating psychological impact of the shootings on the school children at Westside Middle School on Page 3A, along with a speculative article ruminating on the causes of such a tragedy: "Society more violent; so are its children."

The New York Times had one secondary article, which in effect cautioned readers to avoid jumping to conclusions about trends in school violence in the wake of what was quickly coming to be known as the "Jonesboro shootings." That article, headlined "Study Finds No Big Rise In School Crime," noted that during the 1996-97 school year, there

Lawrence T. McGill

examined and analyzed the coverage of the Jonesboro shootings in two national newspapers, two regional newspapers and three news-magazines. McGill is director of research at The Freedom Forum Media Studies Center. He previously was manager of news audience research at NBC and a media specialist for Total Research Corp. He has taught at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University and has published numerous articles and reports about the media.

Wednesday, March 25



were just four suicides and no homicides at more than 1,200 public schools sampled in a survey conducted by The National Center for Education Statistics. One of the authors of the report, Edith McArthur, was quoted as saying, "The numbers seem to be pretty flat. ... As a statistician, I'd have to say that there's no data showing an increase [in school violence]."

Coverage in the regional newspapers was much heavier. Both the Memphis and Little Rock newspapers ran secondary stories about the shootings on Page One and on two inside pages. The *Democrat-Gazette* also chose that day to run a sobering 2,000-word feature article, "Bang! Bang! Parents, watchdog groups debate effect of guns, other violent toys on children," which had been distributed by The New York Times News Service several weeks earlier.

Both regional newspapers joined *USA TODAY* in publishing articles that made slapdash attempts to link the shootings to broader social issues, such as movie and TV violence.

The Commercial Appeal, for example, offered a piece called "Why Do Children Kill? Think Gangs, Family Decline, Violent TV, Movies." Buried in the article was a quote from a University of Tennessee psychiatry professor that should have been taken to heart before the article was printed. Resisting the impulse to offer a hypothetical answer to the question of motive, the professor said simply that it was too early to speculate on whether the shooting was a copycat crime.

Meanwhile, the *Democrat-Gazette* weighed in with a piece headlined, "Experts speculate on motives; Movie violence, availability of guns among factors questioned." It was in this article, appearing in a Southern newspaper, that the question of the influence of a "Southern gun culture" was raised. Later, the news media would come under fire from some who suggested that they had recklessly advanced that hypothesis.

All four newspapers made reference to three earlier school shootings in the previous six months — in West Paducah, Ky.; Pearl, Miss.; and Stamps, Ark. But the careful reader of each newspaper would have come away with four distinctly different impressions of whether these incidents were indicative of a growing trend in school violence.

The New York Times, as noted, went to some pains to counter the notion that school violence was on the increase. In addition to its separate article on the Department of Education study that noted no "big rise" in school crime, the *Times* said in the body of its main article on the shootings that "statistically, violence is decreasing in public schools in the United States, according to The National School Safety Center."

The Commercial Appeal, though, left its readers feeling slightly more alarmed. At the end of its article on President Clinton's reaction to the "horrifying" news, it reported that "just last Thursday, Clinton presided over the release of an Education Department survey that found 20 percent of America's middle and high schools had reported at least one serious violent crime during the last school year."

Citing yet another statistic from the same study, *USA TODAY* made the situation seem even more dire. The final paragraph of its cover story on the shooting read, "The shooting comes a week after a survey on school violence reported that 57% of 1,200 schools reported crimes."

To its credit, the *Democrat-Gazette* merely recounted the main facts of the three previous shootings and did not attempt to characterize those incidents as part of a growing trend of school violence.

Although each of the statistics from the Department of Education study cited by the *Times*, *The Commercial Appeal* and *USA TODAY* seemed to paint a different picture of the prevalence of school crime, each technically was correct. The problem was that each statistic was measuring a different aspect of school crime.

The seemingly most alarming number — 57% of schools reporting crimes — referred to all crimes reported, both violent and non-violent, at all public schools, including elementary schools. Isolating violent crimes only, that figure drops to about 10% of all public schools (including elementary schools) reporting at least one "serious violent crime." Among middle schools and high schools, that number was about 20%, the figure reported by *The Commercial Appeal*.

While the *Times* refrained from speculation about trends and social factors that may have influenced the shooters, it hesitated for only a few sentences before revealing the names of the juvenile suspects. In the eighth paragraph of its main article on the incident, the *Times* reported that "officials would not release the names of the boys because they were juveniles." But in the next paragraph, still in the middle of the front page, it said, "But students at the school identified them as 13-year-old Andrew Golden and 11-year-old Mitchell Johnson, both students at Westside."

The *Times* was the only one of the newspapers to name the two boys on that first day of coverage; others followed suit the next day. The careful reader will notice, however, that the boys' ages mistakenly were transposed in the *Times*' account.

March 26

All four newspapers largely were in agreement as to the relevant subjects for coverage on the second day after the shooting. Each essentially retold the story of the ambush with greater attention to details that had emerged in the first 24 hours. Each provided profiles of the young suspects and their families. Each eulogized Shannon Wright, the teacher who died protecting a student.

An image that would come to be seen by many as emblematic of the tragedy was published in three of the four newspapers — an outtake from a home video taken of Andrew Golden at age 6, brandishing a pistol. (It also appeared in the

April 6 edition of *Newsweek*.) Only the Arkansas newspaper chose not to publish it.

Two new themes related to the incident were taken up on this day and reappeared in subsequent coverage as well: whether the Arkansas juvenile-crime code was up to the task of adequately rendering justice in this case and how the news media handled the first day of coverage of the story.

As the newspaper of record in the state capital, the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* featured no fewer than five different articles on the legal issues surrounding the case. *The New York Times* and *The Commercial Appeal* also ran stories on the topic.

With regard to the theme of media coverage, the *Times* and the *Democrat-Gazette* approached it from decidedly different angles. Media critic Walter Goodman's focus in the *Times* was on the wall-to-wall yet content-starved coverage of the tragedy on the 24-hour news channels. As the news programs kept searching for and usually not finding new information to report, he noted that nevertheless, "the tabloid headlines [were] ready: 'Murder in the Schoolyard.' 'Are Our Children Safe?'"

Interestingly, the page on which Goodman's column appeared bore a page label that incorporated a quotation attributed to one of the suspects: "Bloodshed in a Schoolyard: 'A Lot of Killing to Do.'"

The *Democrat-Gazette* focused not on the content of the journalism but on the journalists themselves, who descended on Westside Middle School "from as far away as Sweden, London and Norway."

It also was on the second day of coverage that anguished editorials appeared in the newspapers, each preoccupied with trying to find answers to previously unimaginable questions.

Coverage on subsequent days

Coverage of the Westside shootings continued well into April in both *The Commercial Appeal* and the *Democrat-Gazette*, though many of the pieces that appeared in the Memphis newspaper were from The Associated Press or syndicated columnists. At the *Democrat-Gazette*, several reporters continued to file stories on the shootings through the middle of the month.

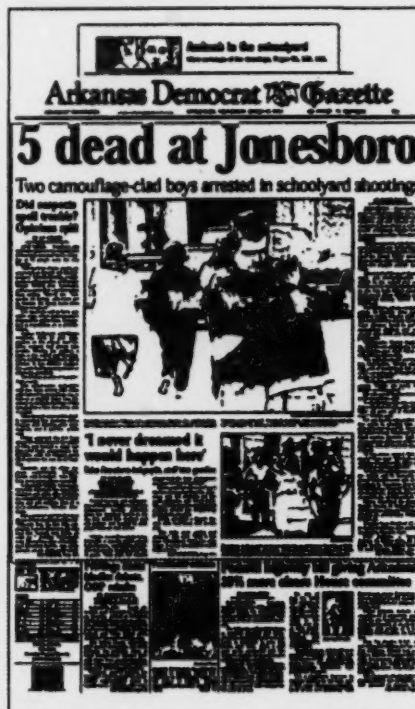
The shootings remained a front-page story throughout the weekend in *The New York Times* (and Friday in *USA TODAY*'s weekend edition). On Sunday, the *Times* devoted more than a full page to a magazine-style recap of the tragedy, and published a thoughtful "Week in Review" piece by Peter Applebome analyzing the tendency to rush to judgment on the causes and meanings of events like these.

"Many people are skeptical about putting concise meanings on very complex events," wrote Applebome. "Thus,

Wednesday, March 25



Wednesday, March 25



when asked the inevitable — "Why?" — Karen Gurtner, the principal of Westside responded, "That is a hard question, and I don't think there is an answer out there that we are looking for." Applebome's article should be required reading for all journalists. (See p. 27 for a reprint of the Applebome article.)

As a new week began (March 30), Jonesboro had moved to Page 3A in *USA TODAY* and had fallen off *The New York Times*' news pages. There was, however, a lively exchange of opinions in the "Letters" sections of both newspapers that continued for several days, especially in response to a March 26 *USA TODAY* article ("Warning signals were simply seen as boyhood bravado"), which asserted that the schoolyard assault was "sparking a debate about whether elements of Southern culture, in which the use of guns is a male rite of passage, have contributed to the violence."

Time, Newsweek and U.S. News & World Report

Not surprisingly, given the oddity of such youthful perpetrators in the Westside ambush, both *Time* and *Newsweek* featured cover stories on Andrew Golden and Mitchell Johnson in their April 6 issues. *U.S. News & World Report* went with a planned cover story on spy submarines.

Time ran the headline "Armed & Dangerous" over a photo of a grinning Golden as a toddler holding a rifle. *Newsweek*'s cover featured a photo of an older Golden (apparently taken within the past year or so) holding a large revolver, over the

caption "The Schoolyard Killers: Behind the Jonesboro Tragedy." It ran a cropped version of the *Time* cover photo on the first page of its main story, adjacent to a full-page image of downcast pallbearers carrying the coffin of one of the shooting victims. Photos of grief-stricken friends and relatives of both the victims and their alleged killers were prominent in two of the three magazines. *U.S. News* ran only one such photo — a surprisingly intimate shot of Andrew Golden's distraught grandparents at their kitchen table.

The question of "why" was addressed by all three newsweeklies, with mixed results. While *Time* and *Newsweek* raised the same social issues that were raised by newspapers (media violence, absent parents and unsecured firearms), both did a creditable job of characterizing these factors as contributors to today's generally more threatening social climate rather than as potential causes of these particular shootings.

Both those magazines also did a good job of focusing on the specifics of recent schoolyard shootings that preceded the Westside tragedy in trying to understand what statistics have suggested are aberrational acts. Their coverage would

have been even more responsible had both magazines abstained from using the phrase, "Why do kids kill?" in subheads. A better choice would have been, "Why did these kids kill?"

U.S. News' analysis focused, more daringly, on whether there was "a virulent culture of violence in the rural South." But having raised this question explicitly in a subhead, it failed to provide any meaningful sociological evidence in the lives of the suspects that could have begun to answer it. In fact, the final six paragraphs of the article did far more to subvert the "Southern culture of violence" hypothesis than the rest of the article did to support it. But the impression one would get at a glance is that such a culture of violence exists and that readers should be worried about it.

If there was a subtext to the coverage in all three magazines, it was that, in some form, gun control was a key issue to be addressed in preventing future incidents like these. Both *Time* and *Newsweek* published a list of grades given to states by the lobbying group, Handgun Control, Inc., based on what each state has done, in *Time's* words, to "protect children from gun violence and accidents."

Where were the cows?

Grazing cows are not visible from the administration building on the campus of Arkansas State University — contrary to a report that began on Page One of *The New York Times* on March 29.

ASU journalism professor Joel T. Gambill says that such an error "doesn't mean *The New York Times* blew it on coverage" of the shootings at Westside Middle School. "But I was concerned about some of the inaccuracies" made by a range of media. "To me, when you make those kinds of mistakes ... you leave a definite feeling among some people about your total content."

New York Times national correspondent Rick Bragg, based in the *Times'* Atlanta news bureau, said he "drove by the college, through one of the gates ... and from one of the gates you can see a farm." He said the item was used in the story, compiled by another *Times'* writer, to show "that the college and the town are in a pastoral setting." It "was not intended to make fun of anyone or to cast people

who live there in a bad light," he said.

The cow controversy was raised at a public forum in Jonesboro on April 13 and repeated later on an ABC "Nightline" program. It surfaced in connection with other reporting errors, some of which left residents fearful that their community of 51,000 was being portrayed inaccurately to the rest of the nation by the media.

For the record, the views from all four sides and the four corners of the ASU administration building don't afford the possibility of sighting bovines. One view, between buildings to the south, includes a swatch of a field used for test crops — definitely not pastureland. Other perspectives offer views of buildings, streets or a campus green.

Nearly a mile to the north is an ASU-owned farm, where in the spring there are horses and cows in the fields. From the farm one can see the tower of the university's new library, but not the administration building.

— Gene Polcinski

Many in media quickly cite 'gun culture' to explain the 'why' of the tragedy

Journalists arriving in Jonesboro seemed bent on seeking quick, tidy explanations for the shootings. Many reporters settled on "Southern gun culture," linking the incident to similar crimes in West Paducah, Ky., and Pearl, Miss.

The weekly newsmagazines played the gun culture theory extensively. On their covers, *Time* and *Newsweek* each ran a different photo of one of the suspects holding a firearm. *U.S. News & World Report's* Jonesboro subhead asked, "Is there ... a virulent culture of violence in the rural South?"

■ *U.S. News & World Report*, in its April 6 issue, reported that Andrew Golden "was learning about guns practically before he learned to walk." The magazine said that as the shootings began, the boys "were picking off children as if they were passing deer on the first day of hunting season." The article cited a "Southern subculture of violence" that leads to higher rates of gun ownership.

In the final three paragraphs of the article, other possible motivations were mentioned, including misogyny and the glamorization of violence in movies, television and video games. The article also noted that one wrinkle in the "gun culture" theory was that one of the suspects grew up in Minnesota. But other possible causes were not explored.

■ *Newsweek*, in its April 6 issue, said that the "senselessness" of the killings "created a vacuum that both experts and people on the street were happy to fill with theories. ... A widely disseminated photo of a 6-year-old Andrew Golden squinting down the barrel of a very businesslike-looking pistol gave rise to much derisive speculation about the rural Southern culture of guns and hunting. ... Arkansans, predictably, rejected the idea that the familiar pastime of shooting could have contributed to the tragedy."

■ *Time* magazine seemed to chide Arkansans for their naiveté about guns in its April 6 issue. "Jonesboro is hunting country, so people there bridle at any suggestion that the simple availability of guns, especially long guns, had anything to do with the killings." The story said that "most of recent school shootings" have been in rural areas where people hunt. According to The National School Safety Center

at Pepperdine University, Malibu, Calif., multiple school killings in 1997-98 occurred in Pearl, Miss.; Norwalk, Calif.; West Paducah, Ky.; Hoboken, N.J.; Jonesboro; Pomona, Calif.; and most recently, Springfield, Ore.

Major newspapers and The Associated Press gave less emphasis to the gun culture angle. AP mainly stuck to the straight recitation of the unfolding facts, rarely delving into possible reasons for the shootings. *The Washington Post* noted on March 28 that Jonesboro residents were angry that people seemed to think they were "crazy about guns." A *New York Times* editorial a day earlier pointed out that the gun culture speculation was permeating discussion of the shootings but said, "the societal sickness the shootings exemplify — children with easy access to guns and ammunition — is not confined to any one region of the country."

National television news accounts, and accompanying commentary from journalists and other experts, also focused on the region's acceptance and use of guns.

■ CNN correspondent Martin Savidge, on the day of three of the victims' funerals (March 28), speculated about the thoughts of mourners: "It's also being questioned this morning as to whether ... a culture that teaches young people how to handle guns and puts those guns in their hands at a very early age may have had something to do with this." In his recorded voice-over, Savidge continued: "Some might find it strange that a community so recently ripped apart by gunfire embraces a culture in which rifles play such an integral role. ... [But] this week's school massacre hasn't changed minds here that there's anything wrong with that."

■ "NBC Nightly News" reporter Bob Dotson said on March 25 that the nearby area of Bono has "world-class hunting" and kids as young as 6 have rifles. "Neighbors say the younger boy (Andrew Golden) is a crack shot. He perfected his skills in this gravel-pit shooting range last summer, then bragged about his large collection of guns."

■ ABC News' Michele Norris said on the day of the shootings that while violence in schools has "leveled off," "what worries educators are incidents like today's shooting — the growing number of multiple homicides in rural and suburban areas where schools are less likely to use security measures."

■ NBC "Today" show host Katie Couric questioned a sociology professor from Auburn University, Greg Kowalski, about the shootings: "Are you a proponent of the theory that somehow the fact that these school shootings have taken place in the South is indicative of a Southern culture that might, I don't know, be more permissive of this kind of activity or somehow encouraged by the acceptance of guns and hunting?"

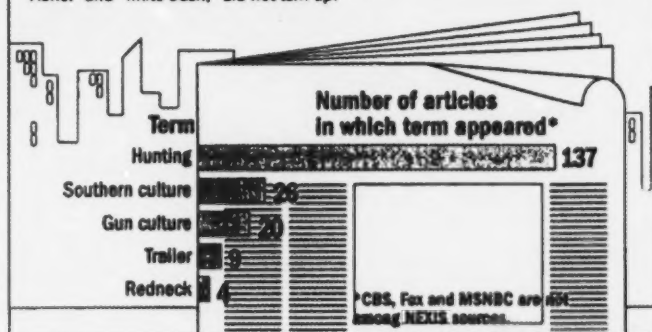
Kowalski responded, "There is certainly a rite of pas-



Stan Mitchell, a reporter for *The Jonesboro Sun*: "I don't care for them referring to us as all 'gun toting.'"

Few demeaning terms found

Jonesboro residents complained that stereotypical and derogatory terms were used to describe them, their community and the South in articles about the shootings at Westside Middle School. A NEXUS search of 870 Jonesboro articles from newspapers, wire services, magazines and television from March 24-31 found the terms shown here, but others, such as "barefoot," "good ol' boys," "U'I Abner" and "white trash," did not turn up.



Jeff Denison

sage oftentimes associated with the hunting culture, and the South does kind of go ahead and expound the notion of the gun culture much more vigorously than just about every other part of the country, except for the West."

The news media's emphasis on the Southern gun culture angle evoked deep resentment in the community.

"A lot of fingers were pointed at the 'gun culture,'" author Dave Grossman, a Jonesboro resident, said. "And yet the one finger that wasn't pointed was the media pointing the finger back at themselves, particularly the network news."

Stan Mitchell, a reporter for *The Jonesboro Sun*, said, "I don't care for them referring to us as all 'gun toting.' I don't own a gun. I know a lot of people who don't own guns in this city. We're a rural state. A lot of people do own guns."

Another *Sun* reporter, Paul Holmes, said, "I guess as a Southerner, and a lifelong hunter, [the Southern gun culture angle] sort of offended me. I'm curious to hear what the explanation would be if it happened in the Northeast or in the far West. It's a pretty glib explanation, and it's convenient."

But *U.S. News & World Report's* Jonah Blank, one of the main writers of the April 6 story, said the magazine's characterization of the boys' actions was appropriate. He said the shootings were compared to deer hunting because Golden was an "avid hunter whose family chose to photograph him in hunting clothing at a very young age; the kids were dressed in hunting camouflage at the time of their capture immediately after the shooting; the alleged killers set up a concealed ambush to shoot their targets, much as deer hunters might; the two children were apprehended with a variety of hunting rifles; [and] deer hunting is a very popular sport in the area."

He continued, "We are not surprised that some might object to the suggestion that gun and hunting culture (which we note is prevalent in, but not unique to, the South) might have played a part in the recent tragedies. [But] the task of a good journalist is to ask questions that people sometimes do not wish to answer. ... Why is it acceptable for commentators

to attribute urban violence to the supposed 'values of the black inner city,' but not acceptable to ask whether community values might play a part when the killers are white and live in rural areas?"

Some journalists and columnists resisted the gun culture story line. *The Washington Post's* John Schwartz, who covered the story in Jonesboro, wrote a column in which he said that he "grew frustrated as I tuned into the national television newscasts and picked up the national newswEEKlies and saw story after story that laid out the causes starkly and simply. ... Most commonly, stories blamed some combination of guns and violent Southern culture."

Schwartz said he knew of reporters who wrote stories that didn't point at the gun culture and "were stymied by higher-ups. ... One who showed real compassion for the people he was covering was told by his editors that they wanted him to focus on 'why young white crackers are killing one another.'" Schwartz declined to name the reporters or news organizations he referred to in his column.

In a column in *U.S. News & World Report*, John Leo lamented the news media's desperate search for easy explanations. "Why did the Jonesboro massacre happen? Nobody seemed to have much of a clue. Details were sketchy, but everyone jumped in anyway, offering standard responses."

He said journalists, commentators and experts jumped on gun access too quickly. "Children's access to guns makes me nervous, too, but so do commentators who speak as though guns themselves turn innocents into killers. In the South and West, hundreds of thousands of children grow up hunting with rifles and never shoot anybody."

John Trout Jr., editor of *The Jonesboro Sun*, said in an interview that he thinks the national and international media seized on the "Southern gun culture" conclusion because they focused on the shooters, not the victims, and in doing so, tried to find answers for a story that may not have an answer.

"The shooters are in jail; they're not going anywhere," Trout said. "Certainly, we'd like to know why they did it, but there were no answers out there. We interviewed psychologists and that kind of people and ran the stories ... but no, you were not going to get any real answers. The victims' stories — the town story — all of that was far, far more important."

— Christy Mumford Jerding and Cheryl Arvidson



Dave Grossman: "A lot of fingers were pointed at the 'gun culture.' And yet the one finger that wasn't pointed was the media pointing the finger back at themselves."

Spin cycle: round and round in the search for meaning

By Peter Applebome

© The New York Times

March 29, 1998

Reprinted with permission

Almost from the moment the bullets stopped flying outside Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Ark., the explanations and analysis began whizzing by.

It was guns. It was the violent culture of the South. It was the violent culture of American media. It was bad parenting. It was the breakdown of the family caused by liberal politics or economic stress. It was violence against women. It was lax juvenile justice laws.

There was much that was true and valid in the instantaneous groping for meaning that followed the horrendous shooting incident in which two young boys are accused of killing four girls and one teacher, and wounding 10 others. But to many students of American culture, there can be something sadly diminished, and ultimately misleading, in the ritualized rush to instant judgment — or the rush to instant spin and advocacy — that now follows each cataclysmic lurch of the news cycle. And it is worth asking amid the flood of questions that the shootings leave in their wake whether the babble of interpreters provides insight or just sows more confusion and cynicism.

"Not only in the media but in the so-called helping services — the shrinks and social workers and counselors and the proliferation of support groups — we now have a mob of meaning makers and interpreters of why things happen," said Larry Rasmussen, a professor of social ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York. "There was a time when the religious community was the locus for that, but now it happens all over the place. The question is whether that provides more clarity or whether something serious is lost amid all the verbiage."

There is, no doubt, something entirely natural and even valuable in the anguished analysis that events like the Jonesboro shootings set in motion.

In some ways, it helps fill an intrinsic need for coherence and meaning in the face of unfathomable events. In his book "News Values" (University of Chicago Press, 1996), Jack Fuller, the former publisher of the Chicago Tribune who is president of the Tribune Publishing Company, argues that at a time of information overload, making sense of events, rather than just report-

ing them, is an increasingly critical part of the journalistic franchise.

"It can be an invitation to be banal or insufferably preachy, but done well, people need to have some context, need to make sense of an event," Mr. Fuller said. "The more profoundly resonant the event, the more people need to fit it somehow into an emotional or moral context."

But the profound resonance of the Jonesboro shootings has not always lent itself to equally profound responses. Antigun groups leaped on the incident as an occasion for activism and spin. "Our children's teddy bears are subject to more regulation than are the firearms causing this public health epidemic," said a spokesman for an antigun group sponsoring a day of protest May 2 on behalf of the 50,000 young victims of gun violence over the last 10 years.

On one of the television shows endlessly dissecting the event, Oliver L. North, the former Iran-Contra figure-turned-politician-turned-radio-personality, said it was "unconscionable" for gun-control advocates to try to make political hay out of the tragedy. Then he substituted his own spin, saying that as a life member of the N.R.A. and as someone who grew up "with a .22 rifle in one hand and a fishing rod in the other," the tragedy proved that the responsibility for raising kids rests with parents, not Federal, state or local governments.

It is a reminder how much of what passes for analysis is really little more than advocacy.

"Instead of just going there and yanking on the heart strings, we've now got armies of pundits ready to hold forth on a moment's notice with various simplistic notions of what just went down," said Mark Crispin Miller, who teaches courses on the media at New York University. "We don't use the word 'propaganda' much anymore, but the constant heavy drone of knowing voices out there is largely a chorus of propagandists talking at us."

The Long View

And while the Arkansas shootings struck many as an entirely appropriate vehicle for examining important issues, particularly gun use and violence, many of the pat explanations fell flat.

The South may in fact have more guns than the rest of the nation. But given that the legacy of guns and violence dates from colonial times, that does little to explain the recent rash of shootings in Jonesboro or Pearl, Miss., or Paducah, Ky.

And just as House Speaker Newt Gingrich drew much criticism with his pronouncements that

Susan Smith killing her children in South Carolina or a gruesome killing in Chicago a few months later were arguments for electing Republicans, many observers said the search for quick meanings in complicated events can get in the way of the search for deeper ones.

"One thing religion has, which is not very popular in the media, is the long view of history," said Donald W. Shriver, president emeritus of Union Theological Seminary, who teaches a course on religion and the media at Columbia University. "Jews, Christians and Muslims rely on documents 2,000 and 3,000 years old, not on today's headlines. I wish news people were able more often to raise serious questions about the long-range meaning of events without trying to answer them. That would be a better contribution to moral and religious reflection than premature moralizing."

Others say that in the rush to instant judgment, it's not just the answers that fall short, it's also the questions.

It's Noisy Out There

June Jordan, a professor of African-American studies at the University of California at Berkeley, notes that the overall frame for the coverage in Jonesboro — How could it happen in a nice small town like this? — differs sharply from similar inner-city tragedies, where the context is often the inherent depravity of the urban environment and its inhabitants.

"So much of what we hear through the media, comes through such a racialized prism," Professor Jordan said.

Mr. Fuller and many journalists argue that the noise level of contemporary society is so high and the quantity of information so heavy that the question is not whether those in the media and elsewhere should struggle to make sense of it, but how well they do it.

"We need to make sense of things, but that doesn't give you a license to be simple minded or leap to cosmic conclusions based on virtually nonexistent facts," Mr. Fuller said. "The way to do this properly, and the way it's done by people who do it best, is to take a situation as it is, complete with the elements of uncertainty, and deal with it on that level. It's not to make sweeping generalizations based on trivial places."

It may well be that people are perfectly capable of sifting out what is spin and what is more important and seeing an episode like Jonesboro both as an occasion for valid — even essential — arguments about gun control and a case with broader dilemmas beyond knowing.

Many people are skeptical about putting concise meanings on very complex events. Thus, when asked the inevitable — "Why?" — Karen Curtner, the principal of Westside responded, "That is a hard question, and I don't think there is an answer out there that we are looking for."

This rush to quick judgment is unlikely to end. In a society addicted to fast food, E-mail and ever-faster computer chips, a demand for instant analy-

sis seems inevitable, even logical. The real question is whether that coexists with a more questioning scrutiny that realizes the pat answers and spin are only part of a much bigger picture.

George Steiner, the literary critic and classicist, is one who is doubtful.

"I think the sound-bite mentality cheapens thought," he said. "Imagine Dostoyevsky. There are some incidents like this, two boys killing other

children, in his famous diary. Imagine what Dostoyevsky would do with that. He would deal with the transcendently important question of evil in the child. Today the editor would say 'Fyodor, tomorrow, please, your piece. Don't tell me you need 10 months for thinking. Fyodor, tomorrow.'"

TV coverage of shootings rated 'average to quite good'

BY ED TURNER

In covering the Jonesboro shootings, television scored few major hits, but it didn't commit any major blunders. The nightly newscasts were thorough, if lacking real depth; the morning talk shows provided informed, interesting guests; the magazine shows generally were disappointing. The local and regional late-night coverage, while less sophisticated and polished, was nonetheless solid in almost all respects.

The network evening newscasts did not delve deeply into the broader issues of gun control, parental responsibility, school responsibility and authority. The reports on those topics were adequate, though the stories were formulaic.

NBC allotted the most time to the story and its coverage seemed the broadest — in part because the deft use of its "In Depth" segments gave the impression that the viewer was receiving something additional. NBC also was the most aggressive, even if some of its stories were somewhat off the mark.

On the morning talk shows, we were treated to pretty standard fare. The "touchy-feely" school of journalism was working overtime in many cases here — and that's not necessarily negative. The national audience is curious and concerned about the survivors, and in that regard such coverage serves a purpose.

But as with the network newscasts, there was too little tackling of the major issues. Katie Couric's interview on the "Today" show with Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee was neither out of bounds nor in bad taste, and Arkansians who thought otherwise were being defensive. In the handling of families and students, Couric's technique was sensitive; in her treatment of a politician, a more aggressive approach was appropriate.

Among the coverage offered by the networks' magazine shows, two pieces stand out in an otherwise lackluster field. ABC's "PrimeTime Live" on March 25 was by far the best single piece of work on the story of any screened. It featured the longest-to-date interview with the grandfather of one of the suspects and a grabber of a piece from Diane Sawyer interviewing juvenile killers, which was fascinating viewing. But it also was thorough and added knowledge. It was smart, meaningful journalism. John Quinones' interview with a suspect's mother on ABC's "20/20" on March 27 also was a worthy piece of work.

In Jonesboro, the relatively small staff of television station KATV produced solid reports on what happened. The reports often were long on emotion, but they did not embarrass, mislead or inflame. In a sense, the station served as a place where the community could grieve and the newscasts undoubtedly were appreciated for their sensitive tone. On the flip side, the station came up short on breaking new developments and exploring the larger issues. Not until late in the story did it address the "how" and "why." But in all fairness, a story of this

magnitude simply may have been too much of an assignment for a small affiliate.

The stations in Little Rock (KATV) and Memphis, Tenn., (WMC) made a full commitment to the story. Their reporting was fair without being alarming. Here, too, the emotional side was played high, but the regional stations made smart use of network footage to help explain the more difficult "issues" stories. Locally produced material was solid, not sensational or sensationalized. The coverage was competent.

In sum, the quality of the television journalism in the Jonesboro story — locally, regionally and nationally — ranged from average to quite good. Reporting generally was competent, controlled and, when it needed to be, compassionate. Among the networks, ABC gets the trophy for its body of work. NBC was interesting with an edge. CBS was quite ordinary.

At times the coverage at every level was awash with pathos and bathos; that probably is the pattern of contemporary television journalism. But on a story like this, a moderate to high level of emotion is to be expected — and that is not necessarily bad for a community, a region or even a nation. Like KATV in Jonesboro, the networks may have opened up a place of grieving to accommodate a national audience. Is that journalism? Insofar as human emotions are part of any tragedy, yes.

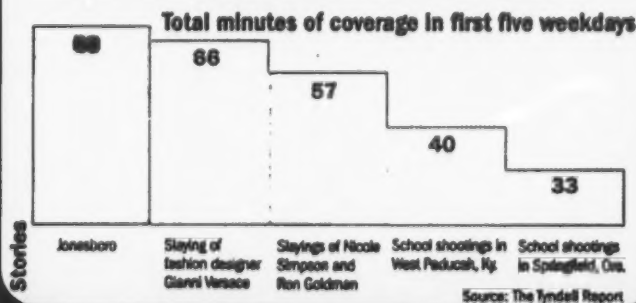
Despite the fact that a breaking story like this one can be a veritable quagmire for objectivity, nothing in the coverage reviewed here raised the red flag of bias. Much of it was more superficial than illuminating, but overall it was fair.

Starting on the next page is a daily summary of news programs and an analysis of each day's broadcast for the first four days of coverage (March 24-27). The Jonesboro story was the lead story on the network nightly newscasts all four nights.

Ed Turner analyzed the coverage of the shootings on the major network news programs and the late-night newscasts of local and regional television stations. He is a Freedom Forum senior fellow and an editor at large for CNN. He joined the all-news network six months before its debut in 1980 and became executive vice president in 1984. During his tenure, CNN won virtually every major award in television journalism.

RECORD TV COVERAGE

Coverage of the Jonesboro shootings was unprecedented for nightly newscasts on ABC, CBS and NBC. According to The Tyndall Report's database of network newscasts for the past 11 years, Jonesboro received 68 minutes of air time in its first five weekdays of coverage, topping such stories as the slaying of O.J. Simpson's wife and her friend.





Above, left to right: Anchors Peter Jennings, Tom Brokaw and Ed Bradley (filling in for Dan Rather) opened their newscasts on March 24 with the Jonesboro tragedy. With Bradley on CBS is Bob McNamara.

Network coverage

March 24 Day of the shootings

EVENING NEWSCASTS

"ABC World News Tonight with Peter Jennings"

- Morton Dean in Jonesboro with a report on shootings.
- Michelle Norris segment on a recent national report saying schools are safer.
- Interview with director of National School Safety Center.

"CBS Evening News with Dan Rather"

- Bob McNamara leads the broadcast from Jonesboro.
- Interview with the Rev. Rodney Reeves of Jonesboro.
- Richard Schlesinger reports on shootings in Kentucky and Mississippi; interview with school safety expert.

"NBC Nightly News with Tom Brokaw"

- Ed Rabel in Jonesboro. His report includes words from eyewitnesses and the Arkansas governor.
- Jim Atwood with more eyewitnesses.
- Reaction from President Clinton, en route to Africa, segueing to a Pete Williams report on the same school safety survey mentioned in the ABC newscast. NBC's take is how violent schools have become. Only at the very end does Williams note that "most students will never see any violence."

ANALYSIS

Tom Brokaw had the best opener, wrapping up what most people must be thinking about "three (school) shootings in five months." NBC devoted the most time to the story and used greater resources. ABC found a silver lining in the gloom, while NBC was alarmed and alarming. CBS was rather bland. No one stumbled and all three provided competent accounts.

None of the children interviewed seemed reluctant and they appeared to enjoy being on camera. There seemed nothing intrusive. The children were not captured on the run or pulled from a crowd.

MAGAZINE SHOWS

"Dateline" (NBC)

- Jim Avila offered an expanded version of what appeared earlier on "NBC Nightly News," leading with a memorial service.

March 25

MORNING TALK SHOWS

"Good Morning America" (ABC)

- Opens with Dean Reynolds in Jonesboro and a wrap-up of shootings. Interview with a student who was at the scene. The youngster is in control, a bit nervous and well-han-

dled by the interviewer. Next, an interview with a paramedic, then an update on the condition of the wounded.

- A doctor says access to guns is cause; Boston specialist says it's not just guns, but kids learning to deal with anger through violence.
- "American Heartbeat" goes to Kentucky for interviews with relatives of children killed in shootings there.
- Three clergymen say let the children talk it out.

"Today" (NBC)

- Katie Couric does the hard lead with Jim Avila in Jonesboro doing the mop-up. Segment from the memorial service, in which we see a youngster surrounded by cameras.
- Couric reprises earlier school killings in the South.
- Ed Rabel has more family reaction in Jonesboro.
- Couric interviews media specialist for Arkansas State Police. Then she interviews a construction worker who held a child as she died. Breaking down on the air, he reflects the shock of the town.
- Pete Williams looks at Mississippi and Kentucky shootings. He reports that youth crime is up; kids are more likely to pull a gun than make a fist. Then he says the number of actual killings compared with 1993 is declining and that violence does not touch 95% of all students.
- Ann Thompson in West Paducah, Ky., with parents whose child was killed in the shootings there.

ANALYSIS

For the morning after, with much not known, the "Good Morning America" segment on guns is respectable, though it may overstate what the ripple effect will be. No sign of camera crew harassment is evident in the "Today" interview with the youngster at the memorial service, who was as poised as a politician.

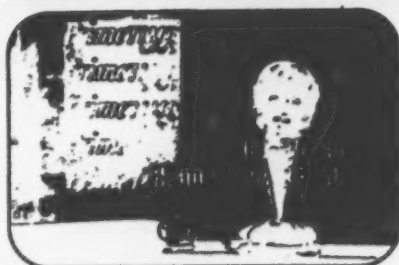
EVENING NEWSCASTS

ABC

- Peter Jennings opens with "efforts to make sense" of the killings. Dean Reynolds, in Jonesboro, names the suspects; still photos are shown.
- Rebecca Chase talks about the South and guns.
- Michelle Norris looks at steps being taken nationally to protect students.
- Tom Foreman reports on parents' legal responsibilities for actions of children.
- Peter Jennings looks at the movement to try juveniles as adults.

CBS

- Jim Axelrod reprises shootings. The names and photos of the suspects are not used until he's well into his report.



Above, left to right: Diane Sawyer opens "PrimeTime Live" on March 25. A crowd of media converges on a Westside student for an interview. NBC's Katie Couric interviews Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee.

- Bob McNamara interviews friends of one of the victims. Dan Rather follows with short obituaries.
- Rita Braver reports on Maryland's efforts in crack down on those who call in bomb threats and trigger false fire alarms in schools, such as occurred in Jonesboro.

NBC

- Jim Avila recaps the crime. NBC claims an exclusive: The suspects had 10 weapons. Suspects are identified.
- Bob Dotson with angry parents; interviews with students and with a minister who met with jailed suspects.
- First-person narrative from an emergency room physician.
- "In Depth" from Roger O'Neil on latchkey kids who get in trouble right after school let's out.

ANALYSIS

Nothing was outside the bounds of good journalism. ABC presented a balanced report with no finger-pointing, possibly too balanced: It required careful attention to come away with the full import of what was presented. With their longer pieces, CBS (kids and bomb threats) and NBC (latchkey kids) were a bit off the mark. Guns, culture, early warning signs, coping with unexpected death would have been topics worth exploring.

MAGAZINE SHOWS

"PrimeTime Live" (ABC)

- Most of the program is devoted to developments in Jonesboro. John Quinones provides the first and most complete look at the suspects, including home video of one of them learning to fire a rifle at age 6. He has the longest interview yet with the grandfather of one suspect.
- Diane Sawyer shows interviews with juvenile killers from shootings in three other states, in which they tell their stories, experiences and thoughts since incarceration. Her report concludes with one of them telling viewers: "If you feel (anger or rage) tell someone, and tell someone else, and then tell another."

ANALYSIS

This program was an impressive piece of work, showing what can be done if enough resources are dedicated to a story. The interview with the grandfather was informative and compelling. Sawyer's segment, particularly its conclusion, was a real attention-getter.

March 26

MORNING TALK SHOWS

"Good Morning America" (ABC)

- Interview with the grandfather of one of the suspects, which includes the airing of a profile of the boy.

- Federal prosecutor says she is exploring all possibilities for bringing charges.
 - Interview with a student and her mother outside the school.
- "Today" (NBC)**
- Katie Couric says charges will be filed, then turns to a report on the guns, how they were stolen, and gun-club membership.
 - Couric interviews Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee. In a pointed exchange, she calls the suspects' arsenal "terrifying" and notes that it's not illegal in Arkansas to have those kinds of weapons. The governor responds that it was illegal because the guns were stolen. Couric asks if the South glamorizes guns, in view of several school killings; the governor takes exception, and says it is ridiculous to say Southerners are more likely to use guns in violent ways.
 - Interviews with students at the school.
 - Interview with a minister about listening to children, followed by a psychologist.

ANALYSIS

The "Good Morning America" interview with a suspect's grandfather is a good example of how live television may work as a catharsis for viewers. Shocking stories produce a need to hear as much as can be supplied, even though the material may not advance the story.

Couric's pursuit of the gun issue with the governor on "Today" drew criticism in Jonesboro at a public forum in April. Resident Dan Melton said Couric "consistently tried to trap the governor into saying things, trying to get (across) her personal viewpoint about guns."

Perhaps Couric's doggedness caught the governor off guard and made him a little irritated. But her line of questioning was legitimate; it was a fair topic to explore and certainly was on the minds of many viewers. The real weakness of this segment was that more time needed to be spent on the issue.

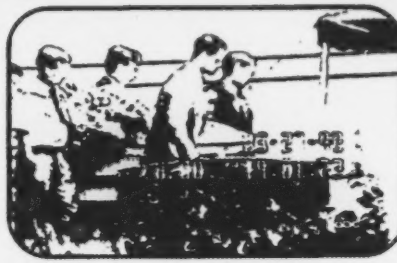
EVENING NEWSCASTS

ABC

- Dean Reynolds reports on funeral preparations, and children asking if their schools are safe. Audio tape of the first 911 calls.
- Aaron Hayes profiles slain teacher Shannon Wright.
- Aaron Brown reports from West Paducah, Ky.

CBS

- Bob McNamara has a basic wrap-up that includes nervous children returning to school and the audio of the 911 calls.
- Profile of the slain teacher.



Above, left to right: Student Jeremy White is interviewed on "Good Morning America." A victim of the shootings is buried in Jonesboro. The mother of suspect Mitchell Johnson appears on "20/20."

- Byron Pitts reports from Pearl, Miss. An interview with the father of a child killed in a shooting there is featured.

NBC

- Jim Avila opens with a Jonesboro wrap-up. He is the first to report that 20% of students were absent that day.
- Pete Williams reports on juvenile justice system vs. adult system, state vs. federal laws and murky legal areas.
- "In Depth" piece covers a Los Angeles area school and its conflict-resolution program for students.

ANALYSIS

NBC came closest to doing what television journalism should do in its two pieces following the news of the day; that is, taking serious looks at juvenile justice and a story on a positive response to a complex problem in one part of the country. Williams' piece on juvenile justice was lucid and worthwhile.

March 27

MORNING TALK SHOWS

"Good Morning America" (ABC)

- Profile of the slain teacher followed by an interview with her husband.
- Parents of a wounded child talk about their feelings.
- A piece on young offenders, which evolves into a survey story on laws in various states.
- Interview with the author of a book on juvenile courts.

"Today" (NBC)

- Jim Avila profiles of one of the suspects. Also, absentee rate at the school; funerals; an update on the wounded.
- Katie Couric interviews the father of one of the suspects.
- Interview with husband of the slain teacher and her parents.
- An interview with a specialist on juvenile law.

ANALYSIS

The "Good Morning America" segment on young offenders and juvenile justice had much helpful information in it. The final interview on "Today" was solid, posing questions that many viewers must have been asking.

EVENING NEWSCASTS

ABC

- Dean Reynolds reports on the first funeral. Interview with the mother of one of the suspects. An inventory of firearms carried by the accused.
- Erin Hayes with a mixture: funeral shots, children as they cope, husband of slain teacher.

CBS

- Opens with report that no federal charges will be filed in

the case, an exclusive.

- Jim Axelrod reports on funerals, with an update on the progress of the investigation.
- Dan Rather updates the condition of the wounded, followed by a Bob McNamara profile of the two suspects and interviews with the father and grandfather of one.
- Rather interviews a court-appointed defense lawyer.

NBC

- Funerals are the introductory story. Jim Avila also reports that federal law does not apply in this case. The shooters will not spend an adult day in prison, he says.
- An "In Depth" segment looks at students and violence in Jonesboro, Kentucky and Mississippi. Ann Thompson's report from Kentucky makes comparisons to Jonesboro. Fred Francis in Mississippi seeks reasons why young boys behave as they do. "Do young kids," one resident asks, "understand death?" Blurring of fantasy and reality discussed. Guns in rural America called a cultural phenomenon out of control.
- Bob Dotson picks up the guns issue: Rural crime is up, metropolitan crime is down.
- Profile of the slain teacher.

ANALYSIS

At this period in the story the networks have wrung the emotional video rag about as hard as it can be. In the ABC broadcast, the story began to blur as elements from one piece could just as easily have gone into another. One got a sense the networks were trying to feed the viewers' baser appetites: "Tell me about it and then tell me more about it." In his interview with the court-appointed attorney, Rather fell into the pit of asking the subject "to share" something instead of saying "tell me." Nothing of substance came out of the interview.

MAGAZINE SHOWS

"Dateline" (NBC)

- A profile of the slain teacher and an exchange on juvenile vs. adult criminal justice.

"20/20" (ABC)

- An interview with the mother of one suspect. Reporter John Quinones presses her: "Where were you" if her son had wanted to talk to her?

ANALYSIS

"Dateline" was little more than an expanded version of what one would see on a nightly newscast. The "20/20" segment with the mother was strong and interesting, without too much artificial emotion.

Local, regional coverage

March 24 Day of the Shootings

KAIT-TV (Jonesboro)

- Anchor leads by saying victims' names are not being released, followed by new developments of the day, noting there will be counseling that evening for students.
- Nighttime footage and chats with community leaders, then to a child psychologist who says let kids talk.
- Interview with two students, then a "mood of Jonesboro" piece: police give details of the shootings; doctor talks about the injured; Gov. Mike Huckabee says "don't lose faith."

ANALYSIS

Taking into account the size of KAIT's news staff, its effort was commendable, though perhaps a bit jumbled. The newscast was short on the facts of what happened, but that's not unexpected, given stretched resources as the station stayed with live coverage. That clearly was the right call; in a story like this, you do a community service by providing an outlet that in times past would be served by the rumor mill. Coverage was erratic, but not unfair or inaccurate.

KATV-TV (Little Rock)

- Opens with a reporter in Jonesboro. Teacher has died. Reprise of the shooting. A look at events that night. A "why here" piece.
- Stories on counseling, the mood of Jonesboro and remarks from Gov. Huckabee and President Clinton.

ANALYSIS

A good wrap of the day's events, but having the reporter on the scene added little to the quality or substance of the coverage.

WMC-TV (Memphis, Tenn.)

- Opens with a student telling what happened, which the anchors then flesh out with details of the story.
- Report from a memorial service.
- Suspects not named. Motive is discussed.
- Report from hospital, then to memorial services. Condition of injured given.
- Sound bite from governor. A profile of Jonesboro.
- Kids killing kids piece from network.
- Live to West Paducah, Ky., for reaction there.

ANALYSIS

A dramatic opening, but it would have been confusing to someone who was hearing the story for the first time. The report from Kentucky was a nice bit of enter-prise, but seemed odd when much of the main story remained to be told. That's where the station's news resources should have been aimed.

March 25

KAIT

Opens with a wrap-up of the suspects' day in court and the weapons used.

- Governor visits the scene.
- Suspects identified, photos shown.

- Interview with lieutenant governor; sound bite from U.S. education secretary.
- Excerpts from "PrimeTime Live."
- Report on healing; car wash to benefit victims.
- Network piece on Kentucky shootings.
- Interview with local author who links violence to television.

ANALYSIS

The newscast had nice tone but not much in the way of news, save for the arraignment of the suspects. The interview with the lieutenant governor and the sound bite from the secretary of education brought nothing of value to viewers. The overall look of the newscast was as though no one had showed up for work on the second day of the story.

KATV

Leads with suspects being charged.

- Interview with governor and a psychologist.
- Memorial services that night.

ANALYSIS

Good use of staff. Nothing was missed and good use was made of material available from the network.

WMC

- Following a sound bite from the governor, the anchor opens with an interview with a mental health specialist who says the community will pull through.
- Report from Jonesboro on that night's activities.
- Anchor summarizes events that occurred earlier in the day.

ANALYSIS

Opening interview was well done and necessary.

March 26

KAIT

- Opens at the funeral services for two victims.
- Report on time and dates for other funerals; shuttle service from Memphis.
- Arkansas State dormitories are available for visitors and funeral attendees.
- Network audio of first calls to 911 is played.
- Interview with slain teacher's parents. The reporter says the woman was not pregnant, as was reported elsewhere. Voice-over on condition of the wounded. Voice of slain teacher's husband describing her fatal injuries.

ANALYSIS

The reporter on the opening segment (the funerals) wrapped up his essay with the irrelevant acknowledgment that he had taken a few minutes out "to cry." The station ran several stories — in the tradition of small-town journalism — about benefits being planned, where donations could be made, etc. Undoubtedly welcome information to the Jonesboro community.

KATV

- Live report on children returning to school; continuing investigation.
- Profiles on the two suspects.
- A report on upcoming funerals

ANALYSIS

Lead reporter did a good wrap-up of the story to date.

WMC

Opens with a report on how the suspects got the guns.

- Story of a young romance gone wrong.
- Feelings of guilt among survivors.
- Suspects in court.

ANALYSIS

The narrative was clean and presented with high energy.

March 27

KATV

- Opens with a voice-over on footage from a funeral, church services elsewhere.
- Friends of slain teacher talk about her.
- A report on gifts to school coming from all over world.
- "What are teen-agers talking about tonight in Jonesboro?"
- School violence piece from CNN.

ANALYSIS

The sidebar on the teacher is a touching piece. The station continues its valuable service as a community bulletin board, providing information on where viewers can call, participate and contribute.

KATV

- Story that no federal charges will be filed is the second story of the newscast. Severe local weather was the lead story.

- On-scene reports from funerals.

- From the studio, an explainer on juvenile vs. adult charges, and a look at the types of weapons used in the shootings.

ANALYSIS

Leading with the weather story was the right call. KATV made good use of its staff and did a solid job.

WMC

- The lead story is a live report from Jonesboro, during which a "crawler" at the bottom of the screen warns of severe weather in the region. The reporter works the threat of tornadoes into his Jonesboro story, a report about the community pulling together.
- Two of the victims are buried.
- Authorities say suspects will not face federal charges.
- A local songwriter pens a tune of grief and sadness.
- A wrap-up of regional efforts to raise funds and promote healing in Jonesboro.

ANALYSIS

Using the "crawler" to plug the weather story while the Jonesboro report was airing seemingly gave the station the best of both worlds. But given that there was nothing startling or terribly new in the Jonesboro report, WMC might have better served its viewers by following KATV's lead and topping its report with the weather.

Equipment trouble hinders local TV station's coverage

The "electronic newsgathering truck" owned by KAIT Channel 8, an ABC-TV affiliate and the only television station in Jonesboro, had been having generator problems. It was due for repair March 24 in Memphis, a little more than an hour away.

The repair trip was delayed that day for some reason, station officials say. And it was that fact — battling the balking generator along the way — that allowed the small broadcast station to report "live" from the scene within minutes of the shootings at Westside Middle School.

KAIT still faced technical hurdles. Having just one "live truck" limited its coverage. Even after trucks and equipment arrived from sister stations on following days, there were problems.

Vice President and General Manager Clyde Anderson said, "Had we had two trucks, it would have made all the difference in the world, and as a result of that we now are getting ready to order our second truck."

KAIT reporter Bryant Huddleston and a reporter from *The Jonesboro Sun* were first on the scene, Anderson said. "The problem we got into was that after we had been there for a while ... all of sudden the people were being taken to the local hospital (and) the local county sheriff was calling a press conference. With (just) one truck we had to break down and leave. There was a 40-45 minute gap in reporting where we had to go back to local programming. And some people thought we might have dropped the ball there."



Clyde Anderson: "Had we had two trucks, it would have made all the difference in the world."

Help was on its way, but not without its own problems.

Recalled news director Harvey Cox: "Our station in Evansville, Ind., WFIE, got a live truck on the road right away. Their live truck was supposed to have its generator pulled because it was having problems ... but they said 'we think it'll work.' So they put a photographer on the truck. He rolled in here I think about 2 o'clock in the morning."

Having a second truck meant a big difference on Day Two. "The governor was going to be at the hospital at noon. We had our live truck out at ... the continuous news conferences and briefings," Cox said. "So I met (WFIE's truck) and escorted it to the hospital and got that set up in time."

Additional help came in the form of a truck from sister station WSFA in Montgomery, Ala. "Except they sent us a dog of a truck," Cox said. "Blew a transmission 20 miles down the road as they drove in. We put (the crew) in a news car, and they went out and covered stories for us until the memorial service. They were here almost a week. It took them a while to get their truck fixed, too."

"Then we had to send the Evansville truck back, so our station in Biloxi Miss., (WLOX) sent us a truck to help out. So we wound up with three live trucks at various stages. Three different stations helped."

KAIT is one of eight stations owned by Cosmos Broadcasting Corp. of Greenville, S.C.

— Gene Policinski

Jonesboro residents praise local coverage

National media mostly seen as rude, arrogant, inaccurate

Local media coverage of the Westside Middle School shootings was mostly balanced, fair and in good taste, residents of Jonesboro said at a forum April 13. But they criticized the national media.

About 300 residents gathered at the "Speak Out," a discussion sponsored by The Freedom Forum, *The Jonesboro Sun* and Arkansas State University, in downtown Jonesboro.

While many said that the media, particularly local outlets, covered the tragedy fairly and were professional as they gathered information, others complained that the journalists were rude, arrogant and reported some parts of the story inaccurately.

Sandra Worlow said the overwhelming media presence on the day of the shooting was intrusive and insensitive. "When you drove onto the Westside campus, it was horrible," Worlow, a social worker, said. "There were satellite vans everywhere. When a child and [a] family would get out of the car to come to the gymnasium (for counseling), there'd be cameramen and people ... shoving [microphones] in their faces."

Many people who needed help stayed away to avoid the media gauntlet, Worlow said.

Diane Holmes, another local therapist, said she had heard children talking about being offered money by members of the media in exchange for interviews. Children shouldn't have to "deal with that ... on top of the whole tragedy," she said.

Benny Baker, minister of the Bono Church of Christ, agreed that the media showed their worst side on the day of the shootings. Not only were they intrusive, Baker said, they disseminated inaccurate information. One radio report "had (teacher) Shannon (Wright) dead at 4 o'clock." She died later that evening, he said.

The attitudes of some reporters drew strong criticism, as well. Former resident Wayne Hoffman, in town for a visit,

said reporters "came in and (assumed) instantly they had perfect understanding of the community." He said television correspondents were particularly arrogant. "They determined that this community needed a certain ... type of healing," he said. "That's not what reporters do. Reporters report facts. ... They're not clinical psychologists."

But Robert Langford said he saw another side of the news media when he overheard their conversations in a local restaurant. "They were concerned with the community. They weren't news hounds. ... They were very caring people."

Some at the forum said journalists denigrated the community with stereotypical characterizations. Residents of Jonesboro were portrayed in many stories as "inbred, back-hills people, poorly educated," Deborah Hall said. "[The press] said that we have given our children guns and taught them how to use them so they can go out and kill people. This is not a fact."

Sarah Wilkerson-Freeman, assistant professor of history at Arkansas State University, said, "To watch our own community reflected ... and realize how different it was from our actual experience, and then realizing, 'My God! What else that we have seen through the media can we really believe?' ... It was an extremely intense, horrifying experience."

The media also missed some major aspects of the story, said Dave Grossman, author of "On Killing," a book that draws a link between violence and television. He said that when the media turn criminals and suspects into celebrities of a sort, it prompts others to commit similar crimes. He cited the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*, which shortly after the shootings featured photos of a suspect.

Cataloging the comments

Six broad themes encompass the remarks made at a forum in Jonesboro on media coverage of the shootings:

- The media were too intrusive.
- The media used stereotypes and inaccurately portrayed the Jonesboro community.
- There were some missed stories: the impact of television, copycat crimes, the abuse of girls.
- The media provided uninformed commentary.
- The media did a good job, were thoughtful and considerate.
- Some news reports were inaccurate.



Sandra Worlow: "When a child and [a] family would get out of the car to come to the gymnasium (for counseling), there'd be cameramen and people ... shoving [microphones] in their faces."



Robert Langford: The media "were concerned with the community. They weren't news hounds. ... They were very caring people."



Benny Baker: The media disseminated inaccurate information. One radio report "had (teacher) Shannon (Wright) dead at 4 o'clock."

— Martha FitzSimon

Media saw no story in girls-as-targets angle

Some Jonesboro residents complained at a "Speak Out" that by emphasizing the "Southern gun culture" theory, journalists missed an important aspect of the story: that the suspects specifically targeted girls in a gender-based attack.

"I have waited and waited and waited to hear the world discuss what we in Jonesboro know was part of this attack," said Sarah Wilkerson-Freeman, an assistant professor of history at Arkansas State University. "[We] know that this was not just some 'random event.' ... 11-, 13- and 12- year-old girls ... are out there on the killing field. ... This was a concerted strike on the girls."

One of Wilkerson-Freeman's students, Mindy Anadell, called the attack "a massacre against females. ... I think that the media did not do appropriate coverage of how boys are taught to treat girls, about how men are taught to treat women."

In initial reports of the shootings, most of the national news media said that most of the victims apparently were female, and that 13-year-old suspect Mitchell Johnson reportedly was angry over a breakup with his girlfriend.

In later accounts, the idea of adolescent male anger toward female classmates was mentioned as a possible contributing factor in the killings, but the theory rarely was examined further. The availability of guns, and the suspects' ability to use them, was the dominant explanation for the attack.

■ *U.S. News & World Report* (April 6) mentioned Johnson's rejection by a female classmate on the third page of its main story, but did not pursue the angle. Three paragraphs from the end of the story, other possible reasons for the attack were mentioned, including media glamorization of violence and misogyny.

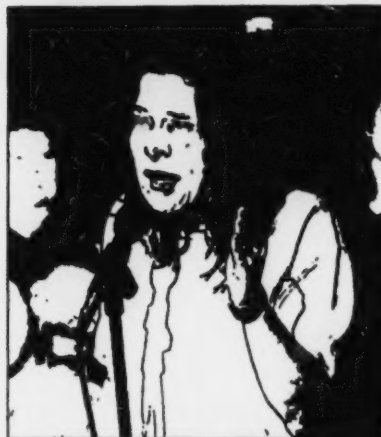
■ *Newsweek* (April 6) reported that a teacher said the suspects would know that girls would be using the exit they had targeted.

■ *The New York Times* (March 26) cited mental health professionals who said the attack could have been the trickle-down effect of adult sexual patterns of stalking and abuse against women. But that was only one of several theories put forward.

■ During "Talk of the Nation" (March 31) on National Public Radio, Ray Suarez noted that a listener had been angered that the media had not talked about the boys targeting the girls, but there was no further discussion of the topic. The rest of the show focused on gun rights.

■ NBC News' "Saturday Today" (March 28) program featured an interview with a psychologist who talked about boys' naturally aggressive behavior.

■ CNN's "The World Today" (March 25) featured a child psychiatrist who talked about the "echoes of domestic violence" in the crime.



Sarah Wilkerson-Freeman: "I have waited and waited and waited to hear the world discuss what we in Jonesboro know was part of this attack. ... This was a concerted strike on the girls."

As scores of journalists searched feverishly for fresh approaches to the story, the idea of boys targeting girls received only passing mention. Whether the shootings were a "concerted strike" on girls may not be known unless the suspects choose to talk about it.

— Christy Mumford Jerding

After Jonesboro: lessons for the media

The story of Jonesboro reminds us that news affects everyone — journalists, government officials and the public. When examined through the prism of fairness, the media's performance in Jonesboro can provide lessons for everyone as well. While some of these lessons are specific to the basics of good journalism, they all, if followed, can contribute to greater understanding between the press and the public.

For editors and news directors:

- Set the tone for coverage by establishing guidelines and expectations.
- Be wary of unsubstantiated information. Anything not observed by a reporter should be scrupulously attributed.
- Avoid demonizing or glorifying suspects or victims.
- Correct errors promptly and prominently in full detail.
- Set standards for the personal and professional behavior of the journalists covering the story: Obey the law, don't trespass on private property, respect the privacy of those involved.
- Know when the story is over and when to get it off Page One.
- Appreciate the value of veteran journalists who know the community and who have built relationships over the years based on trust.

For reporters and photographers:

- Remember that when a disaster or violent tragedy occurs, coverage should reflect the fact that the entire community may feel victimized, not just those directly affected.
- Understand that readers and viewers are better able to handle the grim details when they are reported in a larger context of sympathetic and extensive coverage that embraces the experience of the entire community.
- Don't hype an already powerful story or tell it in florid language.
- Avoid drawing quick conclusions, making unsubstantiated assumptions or creating stereotypes.
- Never misrepresent yourself or engage in deception to get the story.
- Report on what went right, what worked when government and the public responded to a major, newsworthy event.

For television journalists in particular:

- Consider pooling staff and resources to minimize the appearance of a media mob.

For all:

- Remember that trust is the bedrock in the relationship between the press and the community. It enables public officials to deal openly with the press by providing information that allows the story to be told quickly, completely and accurately. Trust also helps the community understand the purpose, needs and duties of the press.



Bill Templeton, *The Jonesboro Sun*

Photographers converge at Nettleton Cemetery for the burial of a student killed at Westside Middle School.

The Freedom Forum is a nonpartisan, international foundation dedicated to free press, free speech and free spirit for all people. The foundation pursues its priorities through programs including conferences, educational activities, publishing, broadcasting, online services, fellowships, partnerships, training and research.

The Freedom Forum funds only its own programs and related partnerships. Unsolicited funding requests are not accepted. Operating programs are the Media Studies Center in New York City, the First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn., and the Newseum at The Freedom Forum World Center headquarters in Arlington, Va. It also has operating offices in San Francisco, Cocoa Beach, Fla., Buenos Aires, Hong Kong, Johannesburg and London.

The Freedom Forum was established in 1991 under the direction of Founder Allen H. Neuharth as successor to the Gannett Foundation. That foundation had been established by Frank E. Gannett in 1935. The Freedom Forum does not solicit or accept financial contributions. Its work is supported by income from an endowment worth more than \$1 billion in diversified assets.